

Chapter 62 - Snowbound

2 days later, the worst blizzard in the last 10 years hit Allakaket. Jake and Diane took it as an omen, and stayed in bed. When the blizzard finally broke days later, Allakaket was under 6-12 feet of snow, plus the 3 feet that were already on the ground. Bill and BA got on the radio and declared a snow emergency, and checked on several older people in town. Several needed assistance, and Ralph volunteered his Snow bug, and the militia said they could use their 3 Snow Foxes, since they had already been reconfigured as snowmobiles. They quickly attached their sleds, and after getting a list of needed supplies, they spent the rest of the day delivering supplies, and helping several people dig out. Their doorways were so thoroughly buried in snow that even if they could get their doors open, they couldn't get out. Ralph dug one of his neighbors out, then handed them several bags of groceries. The old lady offered him some tea, and thanked him for digging them out, since they were in no condition to do it themselves. Jake and Diane never bothered checking whether or not they could get out, and didn't really care. They had 2 weeks worth of wood stacked next to the fireplace, and enough food for a year in the basement. The 1,000 gallon propane and 500 gallon diesel tanks had been filled and they had plenty of time to kill. When they finally got outside, it was a winter wonderland; all the trees were covered with snow. Jake turned to Diane and asked "Want to go for a ride?"

"Haven't you had enough all ready?"

"No in the Snow Bug?"

"Are you getting kinky on me?"

"No, I wanted to go cruising around in the snow bug. If you want to get naked and freeze your butt off out here, you're doing it solo!"

"Well why didn't you say so?"

"I tried to, but lately you've had a 1 track mind!"

"OK, but what's wrong with that!"

"Nothing when we're indoors and warm, not standing outside when it's 40 below!"

They ran back in the house and got dressed in their snowmobile suits, then Jake got the engine warmed up, and they put their helmets on, figured out how to get into the 5-point belts, then put their gloves on. Jake had called ahead, and Ron and Nancy said they'd love to see them. It took Jake a while to figure out how to steer, then he remembered Ralph talking about using the cutting brake to steer, and pulled on the left lever, and they turned left. Now he had it figured out, and they made better time. The Supertrap exhaust on the VW motor was so quiet that Ron

didn't hear them come up the driveway, and until they tripped the infrared sensor, he didn't know they were even there. Since he was dressed for the weather, he went out to greet them. "Seems Ralph gave you your Snow Bug early!"

"Ralph explained that it got him out of 2 months worth of Honey-do's, so it was worth it."

"Your Snow Bug is much quieter than Ralph's - how come?"

"The Supertrap comes with different baffle sets, so I just had Ralph put in the quiet set."

"By the way Dad, thanks for the new truck. I was getting tired of driving that old beat-up truck you gave me when I turned 16!"

"You realize now that I was going to give you a new truck all along, I just didn't want you beating up a \$50 thousand dollar truck while you were learning to drive. Let's go inside and say hi to your mom."

They walked inside, and the first thing out of Nancy's mouth was "So am I a grandma yet?"

Diane realized that Nancy was kidding her, so she played along "Not yet, we couldn't figure out where everything goes, would you mind showing us?"

Ron and Nancy started laughing their heads off - evidently their new daughter-in-law could have been a comedienne.

They looked at Jake, who was turning a very bright shade of red. In deference to their son's acute embarrassment, they changed the subject.

"So what are we going to get first, grandkids or grand puppies?"

Jake saw his chance to get even with Diane and said "I guess grandkids Mom, I can't get Diane to roll over yet!"

Ron and Nancy were laughing hysterically, while Diane was looking for something to throw at Jake. He looked at her, blew her a kiss, and said "Now we're even!"

They spent the rest of the afternoon laughing and talking. Jake asked where his brothers and sister were, and Ron said they were at the range, since this was the first day they could drive to the range with their truck.

"You know Dad, those Snow Bugs of Ralph's are a really good idea. He told me when you guys were snowed in last week, they took the Snow bug and the Snow foxes out and delivered food and supplies to some elderly people who couldn't get out. He said the Bug is even more

stable than a snowmobile in deep snow, and had like 3 times the torque and horsepower. When he was pulling the sled, he had to take off in 2nd gear to keep the tracks from burying it. If you bought 2 snow bugs, you guys could go anywhere you wanted to in town during the winter. The cab is heated, and you're almost too warm in the snowmobile suits with the heater on high."

Ron thought that was a good idea, so he said he'd ask Ralph about it. It was getting late, and they wanted to get back to their own house, so Jake and Diane said goodnight and drove back home. Once they were inside the house, Diane lowered the boom on Jake.

"Jake Williams, that crack about the grand puppies wasn't funny at all!"

"Well neither was your crack about needing a road map!"

Diane realized she had hurt Jake with her comment, so she walked over to Jake and said, "I'm sorry dear, I wasn't trying to hurt you, will you forgive me?"

"Only if we can play Cowboys and Indians tonight!"

Diane started laughing and giggling as they made their way to the bedroom.

The next morning they awoke to the phone ringing.

"Who the heck would be calling us at 0800?"

"Hello?"

"Jake, if you two lovebirds can get dressed and up to Alaskan Survival, you two need to review your winter survival skills. I don't know how much Diane knows, so we need to find out and get her up to speed if necessary! I'll send 007 down for you. Bring your M - 25 and some ammo. The bird will be on the Allakaket pad at 0900!"

"Aye Aye Sir!"

"Jake, that smart-alec crack will cost you! See you at the pad at 0900!"

Jake realized he stepped on it pretty bad, and told Diane they needed to get dressed and meet the helicopter at the pad at 0900, and to wear her heavy duty winter gear and bring her militia pack with the winter cammo, they were going for some winter training at Bear's place. They got dressed, and drove the Snow Bug to the pad and parked it in a vacant hangar. 5 minutes later the 007 came in for a landing, and Bear stepped out with steam coming out of his ears. He got right in Jake's face and yelled "Don't ever call me Sir! I work for a living! That will cost you 20 push ups, right here and now!"

Jake got down in the slushy snow and snapped off 20 perfect Military pushups, counting on every up. When he got back to his feet, he said “Sorry Bear, that won’t happen again!”

“Better not, or the next time you’ll do them wearing your pack!”

Jake knew that Bear was serious, and the pack weighed almost 50 pounds fully loaded.

They climbed into the helicopter and flew to Alaska Survival.

When they arrived, Bear made them put on snowshoes for the walk to the lodge. Once inside, they took off all their outer layers down to their BDU shirt and pants, since it was hot in there with the fireplace lit. Bear rolled out a huge white board and markers. In the upper left corner he wrote “Winter Survival 101”.

Diane’s hand shot up. “No disrespect Bear, but we can probably skip the basics, I spent several years in an Inuit village way up north, and can say that I’ve got the basics down cold, to excuse a bad pun.”

“Ok, Diane, I guess we’ll jump to the advanced techniques. Did they ever show you how to build an igloo or snow cave?”

“We built one every year when we went Walrus hunting on the pack ice. Snow caves are a walk in the park in comparison.”

“Ok, if you’ve hunted wild game in the winter, you know something about winter stealth. What are your shooting skills like?”

“Pretty lousy, until we moved to Allakaket, only the men did the actual shooting on a hunt. I can shoot a 3-4” group at 100 yards with the AR-15 at the indoor range. My pistol skills are about the same.”

“How’d you like to cut those groups way down? Jake here is my #2 Sniper, and a really good shooting coach, especially with rifles. Jake, how’d you like to teach your wife to shoot really long distance. I know it’s freezing out, but it’s good practice for you to learn to shoot when it’s 40 below, because I can guarantee your enemies will! Just remember with the extreme low temperatures, don’t touch bare metal with a bare hand, and your velocity will be significantly lower, so your bullets will strike lower, so you might want to log your shots, including temperature, wind speed, and humidity, which today is around 20%. I’ll get all the stuff you need. You guys get back in your winter gear, and you’re going to spend the rest of the day shooting. Jake, make sure you bring your Coleman stove with you, the propane or butane stoves don’t work worth a crap in this kind of cold. Also, bring a tube of instant heat; you’ll need it to prime the stove.”

While they got dressed, Bear installed a Simmons 3x9x40 scope on a Bushmaster AR-15 HBAR with the white cammo treatment. It had already been prepped for extreme cold, and all the warm weather lubricants had been replaced. He used the laser to boresight the scope, and decided to let Jake teach her how to zero the weapon. Just in case, he grabbed 2 pairs of shooting mittens, and polypropylene shooting liners that were light and thin enough not to affect their ability to shoot, but would keep their hands warm. The last thing he needed was for his #2 Sniper to freeze his trigger finger off. When Bear got to the range, Jake had prepared 2 shooting positions on the 100, 300, and 600 yard lines. He put a huge blue poly tarp on the bottom, a sportsman's Mylar tarp on top, and an ensolite shooting pad on top of that. Instead of setting the spotting scope on the bench, he set up next to his wife, on her left so he wouldn't get nailed by the ejected cases. Since they were wearing parkas, they used ear plugs instead of their usual Wolf Ears headsets. Bear handed Diane the Bushmaster, and was taken aback by the reverence she held it with. Finally they got down into a good prone position, and instead of letting her shoot from a bad position and waste time, since it was freezing out there, Jake decided to take a more active approach, and helped her get into a perfect Military prone position. Once she was set, with the bipod down, she was amazed that the scope only moved up and down when she breathed. He taught her to take 3 deep breaths, blow half the 3rd one out, and as the scope stopped right over the X-ring, to hold her breath and squeeze the trigger. Her first 5 shots gave her the scope's zero, which Jake wrote down in her log book, including the serial number of the rifle, the date, time, temperature, wind, and humidity. Once she had her zero, Jake showed her how to adjust her scope, and the next 5 rounds all hit the X-ring, meaning she shot a 2-inch group at 100 yards. They kept at it until her groups on the 100-yard range averaged 1 inch and were all in the x-ring, then they moved her to the 300 yard range.

“Diane, this range with this weapon will be harder than shooting the Springfield Armory M - 25 at 600 yards. 300 yards is about the maximum range for precision shooting with an AR-15 with a 3x9 scope. If you had a bigger scope, let's say a 12x magnification, you could push that to maybe 400 yards; but at 300 yards your bullet drop really starts to accelerate, because the bullet is slowing down, and moving through the trans-sonic range. I know that's probably over your head right now, but that's why it's so hard to shoot the AR-15 at 300 yards. Let's get you set up, and establish a new zero for the new range. Don't be surprised if you have to add a whole bunch of clicks of elevation, like more than 3 times what you normally would for the increased distance. Let's start off adding 9 clicks just to make sure you're on the paper.”

Diane added 9 ¼-MOA clicks to the elevation knob on her scope, which should have raised her point of impact 2 inches at 100 yards, and 6 inches at 300. She had a hard time believing that the bullet could drop over 6 inches from her 100 yard zero, but once she started shooting, she realized the bullets were still 2.5 inches low, so he had her add 3 more clicks. Her next round landed just to the right of the x-ring, and the overall group was a disappointing 7 inches. Jake talked to her, and explained that shooting at long distance gets more complicated as the range increased, because the wind has a longer time to act on the bullet, as well as gravity. That's why all long-distance shooters keep a log book with all the data so they could review it. Jake spent the next half hour teaching her how to use her scope to dope the wind by looking for

mirage as she adjusted the focus of the scope $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ turn out of focus. She should see waves in front of the object that indicated the strength and direction of the wind. Jake said she could read his Marine Scout/Sniper handbook later for how to dope the wind, but for right now he suggested she add 3 clicks left since the wind was gently blowing from left to right. She got back into the prone position, shot five more rounds, and when Jake checked her group, the first round was in the x-ring, and the rest of the group was down to 6 inches. He told her she had already reduced her group size by an inch, and to keep practicing. She said it was a lot tougher at 300 yards, since she could no longer see her bullet holes, since the sun was directly overhead. Jake said he could spot for her, but they'd have to put on headphones so he could talk to her. He called Bear on his cell phone, and asked if he could bring out a set of headphones so he could spot for Diane. They barely fit under their hoods, and Jake kept the push-to-talk button in his hand. Diane had the other button fixed to the forend of her AR-15 with a Velcro strap. They started talking before she shot, and he told her how he would describe her shots. He would call the vertical offset from the center of the x-ring in inches, then the horizontal offset, so he'd call "up 3 and left 2" that meant that her shot was 3 inches above the center of the target, and 2 inches left, so in order to hit the bullseye with her next shot, she needed to change her point of aim down 3 and right 2 inches. He explained that this was not good sharp shooting technique, but was the best way for a sniper to hit an unseen target or to adjust fire to hit a group of targets when only 1 was visible in the sniper's scope.

Once she got set, Jake was quiet until her first round hit "Up 2 right 1."

Diane then knew that her first round wasn't in the X-ring, and where she missed. She moved her point of aim down 2 inches, and left 1, then fired. "Bullseye"

Now that she knew where to aim, she was able to put the rest of her rounds into that area, and shot a 3.5 inch group. Once she was finished, Jake suggested a scope adjustment for her. She should keep this setting in her log book, and add this other setting as an optional cold-weather 300-yard setting. He suggested 3 clicks down, and 1 click left. He said that the click adjustment for windage wouldn't be exactly right, but close enough for now. She wrote down the new settings, and spent the rest of the morning shooting on the 300 yard line. Once she got her groups down under 3 inches, Jake suggested a switch to the M -25 and the 600-yard line. Diane said "Are you nuts - I'm barely holding 3 inches at 300 yards now!"

"Trust me, this will be way easier, the scope is huge, and the rifle is a tack driver. Basically if you don't shoot x-ring groups with this rifle/scope combination either your stock isn't adjusted properly, or you're not set up right, or you're doing something wrong."

They put up the Bushmaster, and uncased Jake's M -25. When she saw the white feather painted on the stock, she asked Jake the significance of it.

"The White Feather is associated with the greatest Marine Sniper ever, Carlos Hathcock. In Vietnam, he had 93 confirmed kills, and hundreds of "unconfirmed" kills due to the lack of a

witness, usually an officer or a NCO. The North Vietnamese Government put a bounty on his head in excess of a year's wages. He used to wear a single white feather in his bush hat. The Vietcong learned to dread the name "Long Tr'ang" or "White Feather" because it meant someone was about to die. The M -25 was a collaborative effort between Carlos and Springfield Armory to produce the best .308 sniper rifle available at the time. A couple of years ago, my dad bought each of us one, and I've learned to shoot a 2-inch group at 600 yards with it after shooting hundreds of rounds through it. Last year, we got some more M -200 50 caliber sniper rifles from Ronnie Barrett. Years ago, my dad did a testing and evaluation session for Barretts for several rifles, and saved them millions in R&D costs. Ronnie gave him several rifles as well as some serious money in gratitude. We've been shooting our M-200s on the 1000-yard line and are averaging 5-6 inch groups."

"Holy Cow - 5-6 inches at 1,000 yards! Where did you say your cape was?"

Jake started laughing, remembering how many times he'd heard that line in reference to his father.

"Diane, it's a gift from God really. For some freakish reason, my Dad and I can shoot tiny groups at huge distances. I remember my Dad telling me my Grandma Anne used to be a crack shot in her day. She's getting older, and doesn't like shooting past 600 yards anymore, but I remember when my Dad told me he took her to the 1,000 yard range at Elmendorf Air Force Base, and she shot an 8-inch group at 1,000 yards with the M -200 when she was in her mid-50's. My great-uncle Ron was a sniper in Vietnam, and taught Anne how to shoot. She met and married my grandfather Roy Williams when her brother Ron's plane crashed at HelpmeJack Lake when he and Roy were out hunting. Their son, Ron Williams learned how to shoot long distance at a tender age, and his uncle Steve introduced him to Gene Shepard, who was an Air Force General at the time in charge of the Special Operations command at MacDill AFB. My dad's shooting impressed the General so much that he got an appointment to the Air Force Academy when he was still 13 years old.. He was going to be one of the best shooters on their shooting team. . By the time he was ready to enlist at 18 those SOB's in Congress gutted the military and did away with the Air Force. Ron inherited a ton of money, opened his own airline, and the rest is history!"

"Ok, so I married a freak - anything else I need to know?"

"I can teach you most of what I can do, but some of it has to come from you. My resting BP and pulse are so low that the docs have to check it twice. The last time they checked my vision, the docs were amazed, it was better than 20/15. "Ok, now that we've got that out of the way, how about I teach you to shoot the M -25 on the 600 yard line. First let's do some calisthenics to warm up. You look like you're freezing."

5 minutes later, they were good and warmed up. Jake made sure they didn't overheat, because that would be disastrous in this brutally cold weather. They got set up on the 600 yard line, and

Jake showed her how to adjust the rifle to fit her. Once they had the stock fitted, and adjusted the bipod, Diane looked through the scope and the image was pretty steady, and only moved up and down with her breathing. She was careful not to breathe on the scope, because it would freeze and fog the scope. Jake had her dry fire 10 times to get used to the trigger break, then handed her a loaded magazine. They were still wearing the headsets in case she needed Jake to spot for her. Her first group was high and right, and she called the trigger break in the x-ring, so Jake had her make a scope adjustment. The next group was much closer to the x-ring, so he had her make a 2nd adjustment. The first round of her 3rd group struck the bulls-eye, but the rest wandered out of the x-ring. He told her to use that setting as a cold-weather zero for her, so she wrote it down. They spent the rest of the afternoon getting her group size down, and by the time she was finished, they'd put several hundred rounds downrange, and her group sizes were about the size of Josh's. They packed it in, and Jake went in to tell Bear the good news. Bear had an idea, but decided to wait to later to see if he should switch the sniper groups around. He wondered how Jake would react to taking his wife out on a sniper mission, especially if they had kids. Her field craft skills were as good as Jake's, and she could shoot better than Josh, who was going to be Jake's assistant. Bear had a lot to think about.

Chapter 63 - Hitting the Books

When they got home, Jake and Diane had soup for dinner, they were freezing! They curled up in front of the fire and fell asleep. The next morning, Jake handed Diane his copy of the USMC Scout/Sniper syllabus, and explained the document itself was classified, but Gene had gotten permission for limited distribution to the sniper teams that were defending his Classified DOD Contractor. Diane looked puzzled, so Jake gave her a brief explanation.

“Gene Shepard had designated Allakaket Airlines a DOD contractor to cover Ron and certain military weapons systems he shipped here while he was JSOC. Bear used to be a Master Chief in the US Navy, and a SEAL. He saved Gene’s life in Vietnam when Gene got shot down behind enemy lines, and Bear rescued him. They’ve been friends ever since. Ron met Bear at MacDill during his T&E sessions, and offered him a job running the Survival school here when he retired. Gene and Steve joined him as soon as they retired. The DOD contractor designation is a cute subterfuge to bypass a whole bunch of civilian laws that would get us thrown in Prison for about 100 years for all the military hardware we have on hand to defend Allakaket.”

“Why do they need to defend Allakaket?”

“My Dad’s been the target of at least 2 attempts to kill him, and Gene wanted to make sure there wasn’t a third. The first one ended with the militia shooting down a helicopter carrying an ex-general and a hit team sent to kill Ron.”

“Ok, so besides the gold mine, Ron himself is a target - that explains a lot.”

“Diane, I have a sneaky feeling Bear is going to switch the sniper teams around now that we’re married, and you’re such a good shot. You need to read this manual and know it cold. If you have any questions, please ask me. I need to study for my Registered Guide test that’s coming up soon.”

Diane sat down on the couch and started reading at the start. The more she read the manual, the more she didn’t like what she was reading, especially after Jake said something about switching the Sniper teams around. Finally she asked Jake “What did you mean about Bear switching the Sniper Teams around?”

“You know most of the villagers are members of the Militia. It’s a defensive organization to defend our homes and families in the event of an attack. Bear decided to take advantage of my Dad and mine’s exceptional shooting abilities, and form 2 sniper teams around us. Sarah and Sam are the 3rd team, to stay in town as an emergency backup to us. Ron and Ralph were going to be 1 team, and Josh and I were going to be the other. With us married and you such a good shot, it makes sense to switch the teams around.”

“But what if we have kids? I don’t want to leave them orphans!”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. If we both die on a mission, it means we’ve been overwhelmed by a superior force, and their chances of survival aren’t too good anyway. The shelter under the armory won’t stand up indefinitely against a direct attack, especially if they have high explosives. Our job is to keep them from getting there. We’re not the only ones out on the sharp end of the spear. We’ve got 2 Robo-gun equipped Bradleys, 4 Vulcan-equipped M113’s, 2 Chaparral anti-air weapons systems, several TOW equipped Hummers, the Snow Foxes, and a whole bunch of armed Militia members. We will be out on the forward edge where we’ll be most effective, but the M-200’s can wreck an APC at over a mile, or kill a general or other strategic target out to 1,000 yards. Your job would be to spot, and back me up with the M -25 so they can’t get close enough to hurt us. The M -200 has a suppressor on it, so if we hide well, they’ll have a very tough time finding us, so we shouldn’t be in any more danger than any other militia member.”

“Well that makes me feel MUCH better, we’re set up to fight WWIII here, and you’re suggesting we go out on the front lines!”

“It’s not going to be much safer in town if the Chinese or Russians invade. We’ll be all that stands between the town and total destruction. Just be glad we have all this hardware. 99% of all Americans are lucky to own a plain-jane AR-15, or an SKS for self-defense. Their chances of survival in a WWIII invasion scenario are on the same level as a snowball in hell, unless they can get out of the way, or get some serious military hardware and hook up with a militia.”

“Jake, you’re such an optimist.”

“No Diane, just a realist - look around you, the world’s going to Hell in a handbasket! Something’s got to give.”

“Then why are we having kids?”

“Just in case I’m wrong, and the upcoming turmoil is survivable. Besides, you’ve heard the Mike and the Mechanics song “Silent Running” - If we can’t defeat the invaders, perhaps if we teach our children well, they can rise up and stand against them.”

Diane gave Jake a big hug and cried, she didn’t want to have to face that scenario. She remembered the stories from the Elders of how the US treated the tribes to the south of them. They coveted the Indian land, and drove them onto reservations, starved them, and gave them smallpox infected blankets to kill more of them off. Millions of the southern tribes died in the great trials. Some whole tribes were wiped out. She knew if the Russians, Chinese, or even the UN were to attack with sufficient forces, they’d face a similar situation. They’d be killed outright, or driven from their lands, starved, and worse.

Finally, she realized that it was up to them to defend the rest of the tribe, as she thought of it, and if they died in the process, someone would take care of their kids. She had always wondered why Nancy and Sally tried so hard on the pistol range, then realized the ferocity of a mother bear with cubs could be several times that of any other bear. She realized that if someone threatened her kids, she'd respond with the same ferocity. She didn't understand the feeling, she just knew it on a visceral level she had never felt before. Jake was watching his wife turn from an ex-sheeple into a Valkyrie before his eyes. He remembered when his Mom first started shooting, and years later he asked his dad about the level of intensity she displayed on the range.

"Instinctually, a mother defending her children has a tremendous level of ferocity. Some women can tap into that emotion even when their children aren't in immediate danger, so they can practice just in case. The Vikings had a term for their Warrior Goddesses, they called them Valkyries, and Wagner wrote a song that was part of a famous opera, and the song is now more famous than the original opera. The song is called "Ride of the Valkyries" - look it up sometime."

Jake played the song on the internet once, and the song was so stirring that he bought a copy of it. When he read the liner notes that came with it, they described the legends of the Valkyries which took noble fallen warriors to Valhalla, the Norse version of Heaven. The Valkyries themselves were described like the Avenging Angels he had read in the Bible. The look on Diane's face definitely reminded him of that image. He asked Diane to come with him, and he loaded the MP-3 file he had downloaded, along with the liner notes. She was moved to tears when she heard the song, and really lost it when she read the liner notes describing the legend of the Valkyries. She understood her feelings better after listening to the song and reading the liner notes. Jake told her of the use of the song as a battle call in "Apocalypse Now" when the Air Cavalry was attacking the NVA at dawn. She admitted that song really got her pumped up, and would probably scare the crap out of the enemy! She finally told Jake she was OK with this, but wasn't looking forward to dying in battle. Jake held her, and said "Me neither - this is just precautionary, and hopefully never needed, but we need to practice as if it were needed."

Diane returned to her studies with a new-found intensity. She needed to know this stuff cold! Jake went back to studying for his Registered Guide test, and made dinner later that afternoon since Diane was still studying.

The next day Diane asked if they could go to the range again. She wanted to shoot the M -25, and she suggested that Jake work on the M -200 since he didn't fire it last time. The weather had warmed up to -20 Fahrenheit, so Jake thought they'd be more comfortable. He called Bear, and he said "come on up, the weather's fine." Since he had the skis mounted on the SuperGoose, and it was available, Jake flew them to Alaskan Survival, and landed at Bear's lake, which was covered with 6 feet of ice, and 4 feet of snow. The taxi off the lake was bumpy to say the least, and when they were on terra firma, he shut down the SuperGoose and lowered the ramp. They backed the Snow Bug with their rifles and ammo out of the SuperGoose, raised

the ramp, and drove to the range. Bear was laughing his head off, but thought they were smart. Instead of trudging through 4 feet of snow for a mile or so, the Snow Bug made an easy trip out of it. Jake dropped Diane off at the 600 yard line with all her gear, then drove over to the 1,000 yard line and set up.

As soon as he had his earplugs in, he waved to Diane, so she would know it was OK to start shooting. Once he had the M -200 set up, he loaded several magazines full of Lake City BMG 50 Match ammo, and got ready to shoot. His first round was vertically centered, but 3 inches low. Checking the hole in the target, he used the moa grid in the sight, and decided to add 1 click of up on the elevation turret. His next round was just slightly high of the bullseye, but in the x-ring. He decided to write down the new cold weather zero and all the data in his log book. He didn't need any windage compensation because for once the wind was practically still. When he was done writing, he fired 3 more rounds, and he shot a 6 inch group. Not his best, but pretty good under the circumstances. He loaded another magazine, and his second group was smaller than the first, probably right around 5 inches. He shot 20 more rounds, then left the rifle where it was, and drove over to ask Diane if she wanted to try her hand at the M -200. She practically jumped up and hugged him "Heck Yeah - let's go!"

They drove the snow bug down to the targets, and put some fresh paper on his target. Diane was staring unbelievably at his groups. "I guess you guys really are special. You just shot the same size group at 1,000 yards that I did at 600!"

"You shot a 5-inch group at 600 yards in these conditions - that's fantastic!"

"What do you mean - That's barely a sub-moa group?"

"Yeah, but it's 20 below and it's way tougher to shoot well when you're shivering cold and you have to be extra careful not to freeze your hand to the rifle. Wait until spring and your groups should drop down to 3-4 inches when you're more comfortable."

They finally reached Jake's shooting position, and he decided to let her use his position, and he set up a spot off to her left with a tarp, a sportsman's tarp, and an ensolite shooting mat. Once he was set, he set up the tripod on the spotting scope, and switched his earplugs for the headset and microphone they were using yesterday. He walked over to her, and helped her adjust the stock, bipod, and monopod to fit her. He was happy that her shooting position was so good that he didn't have to fix anything besides her fit to the stock and the bipod/monopod settings. She looked through the scope, and the image was rock steady. Jake had her do 10 dry fires and call where the trigger broke, then gave her a loaded magazine, and moved back to the spotting scope. When he was ready to go, he gave her a thumbs-up, and she pulled back the bolt and let it fly forward, chambering a live round. Looking through the scope, she could see the image wiggling in the sights now that she had a firing grip on the weapon, and she knew the wiggle was because of her. She told Jake the scope was wiggling all over the place, and he said she needed to settle down, that target was $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile away, and the only reason she could even see

it was because of the terrific scope. He suggested reciting the 23rd Psalm. He started it, and she caught on quick. By the end, she said her scope was just hovering around the x-ring. Jake said that's exactly where it was supposed to be. He told her that at this range, she needed to anticipate her trigger break, because lock time entered into the equation at this range. The time between when she pulled the trigger and the hammer struck the primer was a finite amount of time, then it took another fraction of a second for the bullet to exit the barrel. During that whole period, she could influence the path of the bullet, so she needed to squeeze the trigger when the sights were on their way inside the x-ring instead of on the way out. Experience would teach her exactly when to trigger the rifle.

She asked if he were done, she was falling asleep behind the scope. He laughed and told her to go ahead. She must have been listening, because her first round went right through the bullseye. He didn't say anything, and she shot 4 more times before the rifle locked open on an empty magazine. He checked her group, and it was hovering right at 10 inches, not terrific, but pretty darn good for the first time shooting the rifle, and in freezing conditions. He walked over to her, picked her up, and gave her a big hug and a kiss. She was grinning from ear to ear when he told her she shot a 10-inch group, which was better than Josh's best group, even when it was warm out. That cinched it in Jake's mind, she could shoot his zero with the M -200, and the first round, which was the critical round, was right on target. Since she was freezing, he suggested they pack it in and go talk to Bear. They packed the gear up, and drove the Snow Bug to the lodge. Jake told Bear that Diane shot a 10-inch group the first time out with the M -200, and she could shoot his zero, since the first round went through the bullseye. Their zero on the M -25 was different, but not enough to matter.

They sat down in the classroom and Bear told them what he had on his mind, and Diane said that they were way ahead of him, that Jake had already given her his Scout/Sniper manual, and she was OK with being Jake's Sniper team partner. Bear tried to talk her out of it, but could see that her mind was made up, so he went with it. He hoped that Josh could marry someone who was a good shooter, or they'd have to find another job in the Militia for Josh. He thought about pairing him up with his sister, but she was a better shot with the M -200 than he was, and that might be hard on his ego. For now Jake and Diane would become his #2 Sniper team, with Josh as a backup in case Diane was 9 months pregnant when TSHTF. He could deal with Josh if and when the time came. With that out of the way, he spent the rest of the day talking about field craft. Between her Inuit background and what she read out of Jake's manual, Diane's knowledge of field craft was the equal of Jake's. When it got warmer this spring, he decided to send the two of them out on a field exercise and find out how good they really were. He gave them some more study guides, and told them to go home and get warm. He grinned when they had left, thinking he might have phrased that differently.

They got back into their snowmobile suits, drove the Snow Bug back to the SuperGoose. Jake climbed out and opened the cockpit door, and flipped the switch that opened the rear ramp, and trudged back to the Snow bug and drove it up the ramp. Diane hit the switch that raised the ramp as Jake shut down the engine, so they wouldn't get carbon monoxide poisoning or freeze

their butts off. Once the door was up, Diane connected and tightened the tie-downs to anchor the snow bug into place, then walked forward to the cockpit and climbed in the co-pilot's seat. Jake was ready to take off by the time she got belted in. He left the left engine at idle, and spun up the right one, which turned the plane to the left. Once they were facing the lake, he slowed the right engine to idle, and advanced both throttles to taxi. The ride to the downwind end of the lake was bumpy, but it was worth it to be able to bring the snow bug with them. They finally reached the end of the lake, and he turned into the wind to take off, then advanced both throttles to full, and was soon doing 85 knots, at which point he pulled back on the yoke, and held a 20 degree nose-up attitude until he was above 500 feet AGL, at which point he eased off his climb to 2,000 feet. He called Ron while he was in the air, and told him that the SuperGoose not only could hold a Snow Bug comfortably with 8 seats in, but it didn't really affect the flight characteristics that much, since they were pretty light. Ron said he had already ordered 3 Snow Bugs from Ralph, and he'd get them in a month or two. Jake thought if this kept up, Ralph should just open a shop and build Snow bugs.

They landed at Allakaket and reversed the process, backing the Snow Bug out of the ramp, then closing it back up. They drove home and spent the rest of the day studying.

A couple of months later, Jake flew to Anchorage to take the state test for a Registered guide. Unknown to Jake, the Registered guide at Doc's had decided to retire, and had sent a glowing letter of recommendation to the state along with the required paperwork. He had all his applications filed and fees paid for the January 28th test date. The registered guide told Jake that the test would be a walk in the park for him, and the only sections he needed to study would be the Alaska Game Regulations, since he was already a State Paramedic, and knew more about guns and stuff than he did, and had dressed and skinned more animals in the 5 years he worked for him than he had done while he was an assistant guide. On the morning of the 28th, he flew to Anchorage, drove to the test site, and an hour later, he walked out with his temporary license. He passed with a score of 95%, since he missed 2 questions on the 50-question test, he guessed they were both on the state regulations, which could be seriously confusing. He called Doc when he got home, and Doc gave him the news that their Registered Guide wanted to retire, and they wanted Jake to fly the customers to the lodge and guide them for \$50 thousand per year. Jake practically jumped up and danced after he told Doc "Sure" and hung up the phone. Diane wondered what he was so excited about until he explained that Doc's Lodge wanted to hire him to fly clients back and forth, and guide them for \$50 thousand for a 5-month season. When he wasn't guiding for Doc's, his Dad wanted to pay him another \$30 thousand as a relief pilot. He was only 18, and he was getting offered a combined salary of \$80 thousand per year, and their house was paid for. This meant they could open their own lodge and guiding service sooner than he had planned. He kissed her and hugged the stuffing out of her, then they settled down.

"This means I'm not going to be home much during hunting season, are you sure you're OK with this?"

"I'm more OK with you working out of Doc's lodge than trying to scrounge up customers on

your own. They're paying you a salary which means you get paid whether you're guiding or not! This is an answer to my prayers!"

Jake called his Dad up and gave him the good news. Ron told him he already knew since Larry had given his notice the end of last season, and recommended Jake as his replacement, assuming he got his Registered Guide license, since he was already a Commercial Pilot. It would be a perfect situation for the lodge, they got a guide and a pilot all in the same person, which would save the lodge tons of money since they wouldn't have to hire a guide and a pilot. Jake was jazzed, because he was planning on not making near that much money for the first 5-10 years as an independent Registered guide, and he'd have to hunt way away from home to guarantee his clients could get a tag. He already knew the staff at the lodge, and got along great with everyone. With an \$80 thousand dollar salary, he was halfway tempted to keep working for the lodge instead of hassling with opening his own guiding business, and putting the money in the bank or investing it.

Chapter 64 - Preparations

They spent the rest of the winter practicing their shooting skills and training in the lodge's classroom with Bear, or goofing off and shooting at the indoor range and the swimming pool. Nancy thought they made a cute couple at the pool, and was slightly envious of Diane's 18-yr old figure. Jake reminded her of Ron at his age, like a leopard - grace and power under subtle control. She wasn't sad though, they had done an excellent job raising their 4 kids. Josh, Sarah, and David were still living at home, but making preparations to live on their own. Sarah had a steady boyfriend, and Josh was dating several girls, seeming not to be in any hurry to settle down. He took the news of getting replaced by Diane as Jake's assistant pretty well, and decided to join the combat medic teams. He wanted to take after his Great-uncle Steve, and see if he could join the military as a Para-rescue Jumper. First he'd have to join the Army, get selected for Special Forces, and then get selected for the Pararescue Jumper program. Steve and Gene said they'd do what they could, but they weren't selecting many applicants anymore. For some reason, they were phasing out the PJ program. Steve suggested if he wanted to do something similar, the Coast Guard Rescue Swimmer System was still in full swing. Josh wasn't too interested in the rescue swimmer program, since they didn't shoot people. Steve tried to talk some sense into Josh, telling him that if a PJ did his job right he didn't shoot people either, it was only when the mission went totally FUBAR did you end up shooting people. In all the missions he did, he only fired his weapon 3 times, and he wasn't even sure he hit anything; he was shooting to suppress fire coming too damn close to his patient. Steve hoped Josh would grow up and realize that no one enjoyed shooting someone else.

Ralph and Sam were busy raising Bert and Larry, while Oliver provided the Comic Relief. By now, their two sons were between the terrible twos, and impossible 5's. Oliver was big enough that they played with him, and he knocked them over. Just like his namesake, he was a chow hound, and could always hear the sound of the can opener, even from the other side of the yard. Ralph spent most of the winter building 3 Snow Bugs for Ron. He was seriously considering building them as a small business, since the liability issue had been settled with the 5-point restraint systems being installed in all new Snow Bugs. All the frames that Chenoweth shipped him had the extra tab for the anti-submarine belt. Since he was ordering more frames at once, they started offering him better pricing. Ralph developed a website to advertise and sell the Snow Bugs, and had gotten several inquiries, but no firm orders. He guessed the \$10K price scared any potential buyers away. The only way he could cut that price was if he was building them on an assembly line 10 at a time or more. The thing that really killed him was the shipping of the parts to Alaska. If he lived in the lower 48, he could sell them for \$8K right now, and \$6-7K if he were making 10 at a time or more.

Once a month, Ralph and Ron squared off for the Open pistol shooting competition. Usually the match was decided by a single round, or a fraction of a second. Ralph's long distance shooting improved with practice since both He and Sam had their own M-25's. Nancy, Sam, and Sally were always the top 3 shooters in the Women's open pistol shooting, and the order of

finish depended on how much practice they'd gotten the previous month. Ordinarily your 55th birthday was something to dread, but in BA's case, it was a mixed blessing, since he no longer had to compete against Ron in the open class. Since he had been competing against Ron for so long, Gene, Bear, and Steve were soundly beaten at the first Senior Pistol competition after BA turned 55. They vowed to never let that happen again, and spent several days a week at the range for the next couple of months until they caught up to BA. The three military men were livid that a "cake-eating civilian" had beaten them at pistol shooting, something all military officers pride themselves in. It took them several months to finally beat BA, but Ron thought it was because BA slacked off on the practice since he no longer had to shoot against him. All the senior men swam laps in the pool to stay in shape, especially when one of the Inuit men threatened to come in there with a harpoon. Gene wasn't amused, he was in pretty good shape for a guy in his 60's. Bear threatened to show him where he could stick that harpoon, and he beat a hasty retreat.

When he got home that night, he complained to Mary, who very diplomatically told him he had been putting on weight, and was getting soft in his old age. Instead of getting mad, he realized she was right, and spent more time at the pool. What they really needed was a gym and a weight room. He asked Ron about it, and several of the moms had told him and BA they would like an aerobics program for the winter to stay in shape. They found out how much it would cost, and told everyone they'd start construction in the spring on an addition to the pool for a weight and exercise room. Since the pool was 25 yards long by 50 feet wide, the building was 75 feet wide, so they bought another 75 foot wide by 100 foot addition that could connect directly to the existing building, saving the cost of the 4th wall. Ron was amazed at how well the steel buildings were holding up to the Alaskan winters. With the excess heat from the Geothermal power plant not only heating the Jacuzzi, pool, and greenhouse, but providing room heat for the shooting range, pool and the General Store, the company didn't have many expenses for heat or light, so they could easily add more buildings as long as they had the power. The geothermal steam generators were producing 40MW peak power, and had plenty of reserve left, since they normally only needed 3 of the 4 10MW turbogenerators. During the winter they used more power, since Ron, Ralph, Jake, and BA's houses, the hotel, and their other buildings weren't producing hardly any solar power, still they had plenty in reserve.

Bear had talked to Steve, and decided that Josh needed to talk to him, so he sent the 007 for him, and when he got there, Bear sat Josh down and told him that Steve said that Josh wanted to join the PJs instead of the Coast Guard because the Coast Guard didn't shoot people. "Josh, the PJ program wouldn't take you with an attitude like that, and neither would Special Forces accept you. We aren't looking for Rambo out for blood, we want men who are willing to complete the mission, no matter what. You need to get your head screwed on straight. War isn't like those video games you've been playing. I know, I was there, and I still carry the scars. In war, it's kill or be killed, but we don't go looking for people to kill. In the Teams, when we do everything right, no one fires a shot, we accomplish the mission without them knowing we were even there. If we start shooting, it means someone screwed up, and maybe a team member is going to die! If you want to join the military, great, but if you just want to shoot someone,

I'll kick you out of the Militia so fast your head will have to catch up with your butt! Now Grow UP!"

Bear stomped away, hoping to God that Josh had gotten the message. He was a good kid, it's just that some kids developed a warped sense of violence from the video games, and needed a serious reality check.

15 minutes later, Josh knocked on Bear's door. "Enter"

Josh stood at attention in front of Bear until Bear said "be seated"

"Bear, I'm sorry. I guess I've got some growing up to do."

"First of all, I'd toss those video games, and start reading some good books. Video games warp your sense of reality. I hate war, I've lost too many good friends in the teams to ever want to go to war again. If it comes, we'll be ready, but we don't go looking for trouble. In the Combat Medics, your job is to save lives, not take them. I thought that's what you wanted. Was I wrong in that assumption?"

"No Bear, you weren't."

"Do you still want to join the military?"

"I'd like to try, except if what Steve said was true about the DOD phasing out the Para-rescue jumper program, I might be better off applying for the Coast Guard rescue swimmer program. Hopefully by my 18th birthday, I'll have my Paramedic certificate, and that would put me ahead of several applicants for the Rescue Swimmer program."

"Josh, if you're serious, you'll have to become a much better swimmer, and a lot stronger. If you're serious, I'll start working out with you in the pool and weight room so when you're ready to enlist, you'll have a better chance of qualifying."

"Thanks Bear, I'd like that! I'm sorry if I've caused any problems."

"Nothing that couldn't be solved. Dismissed."

The 007 flew a much more contrite Josh back to Allakaket, and the next week, he started working out with Bear in the pool. First he started swimming laps, then more laps, then finally a mile at a time. They spent time in the deep end of the pool learning to swim underwater. Bear was still a certified PADI instructor, and wanted to give Josh scuba lessons, but the pool didn't have a diving board, so it was only 10 feet deep, and the surrounding lakes were too cold and murky. Instead Bear gave him all the book knowledge he needed to get his PADI cert, and had him practice with a mask, snorkel, and fins in the pool. Later that spring, when the weight

room was completed, they both started a weight training program. Bear started on light weight, high repetition; and he got Josh started on light weights, and gradually increased the weights as his strength increased. A Rescue Swimmer needed a lot of strength to complete the mission. Once Josh had made the decision to join the Coast Guard rescue swimmer program, Gene and Steve started checking things out for him. The news wasn't good. It was almost easier to get into the SEALs than the rescue swimmer program. When they told Josh that, he thought, "I'd never considered the SEALs, they needed medics too, and I'd get to carry a gun." He talked to Bear, and when he told him he was considering the SEALs, Bear almost started crying. Josh said "What's wrong?"

"When I first met your dad, he was only 13 and he really impressed me. We tried every trick in the book to impress him and get him to change his mind from going to the Air Force Academy, but your uncle Steve had the wheels greased and Gene behind the cart pushing. Your dad would have gone to the Air Force Academy on his 18th birthday if it weren't for those idiots in Congress dissolving the Air Force. Anyway, when we were out diving in Florida, he said some things that made me very proud of him. He said that if he weren't going to the Air Force, he would have considered the SEALs. If you're serious, I'd talk it over with your mom and dad before you breathe a word of it to Gene or Steve, because they can open doors for you, and give you a good shot of making the Teams if you do your part. I'm not going to lie to you, BUDS is everything it's cracked up to be. It's designed to weed out those that don't belong, who don't have the motivation to never quit until they're dead, and who won't put the team, their swim buddy, and the mission first above everything else. If you're serious, we need to change your workout regiment so you'll be in peak shape by your 18th birthday."

"Thanks Bear. Let's keep this between us for now until I ask my Mom and Dad."

"Ok, Josh, I just wanted you to know you made me proud back then, so whatever your decision, I'm still proud of you!"

That night, Josh took his mom and dad aside after dinner.

"Mom, Dad, I need your advice, and I have some questions. I was thinking about joining the military as a PJ like uncle Steve, when Steve told me the military was phasing out the PJ program. They suggested going into the Coast Guard as a Rescue Swimmer, but when they checked, it was easier to get into the SEALs than the Coast Guard's Rescue Swimmer program. I'd never considered the SEALs before, and I asked Bear about it, and he started crying, and explained when he first met Dad when he was 13 years old. I don't know what to do. I'd like to try out for the SEALs, but I wanted your advice first."

"Ok Josh, why would you want to join the SEALs?"

"I wanted to be in an elite unit as a combat medic, so my first idea was the PJs. Steve mentioned the Coast Guard, but found out the Rescue Swimmer program is full, and they're

really not recruiting any new trainees. It turns out the SEALs need medics that are SEAL trained, since they've gotten by with Navy Hospital Corpsmen, but they really wanted people who had been through BUDS, and were an integral part of the team. Bear said I needed to talk to you guys first, because if I mentioned it to Gene or Steve, they'd get the ball rolling, and once it was rolling, getting it stopped would be difficult. You know what I mean Dad, Bear told me that Steve greased the wheels for you to go to the Academy, and Gene was behind the cart pushing."

Ron laughed "That's a pretty accurate description of what was going on. The only way I wound up not going to the Air Force Academy was when Congress basically disbanded the Air Force right before my 18th birthday. Bear really impressed me, as did the rest of the SEALs. If you had to go in the military, you could do a lot worse."

Nancy knew how dangerous the military was, but knew that Josh really wanted to go. She gave him a big hug and told him to follow his heart, and they'd back his decision. Josh took that for a yes, and gave his mom and dad a big hug, and said he needed to call Bear.

The next morning, Josh met Bear at the pool, and Bear told him to swim as long as he could, as fast as he could, and keep doing it for the next couple of weeks. If he could do that, he'd be just starting to get an idea of how tough it was to get through BUDS and become a SEAL. Josh followed Bear's instructions to the letter, and started swimming a mile or more at his quarter-mile pace. He practically drowned several times, but he didn't quit. Bear was impressed. When the weather warmed up they started jogging farther and farther. Josh was getting in great shape, and it helped Bear get back in fighting trim too. When he wasn't running or swimming, he was hitting the weight pile.

During the spring, Bear found time to run Jake and Diane through a field exercise that involved a long stalk, and a target location and identification drill just like the Marines did. He knew their shooting skills were excellent, so they didn't have to do the shoot part of the field ex. Bear was scanning the field with his binoculars, and was amazed that he couldn't find the two of them. Finally he had them stand up, and they were no more than 100 yards away, dressed in a very interesting Ghillie suit that looked like nothing he had seen before. He asked them about it, and Diane said that she had added Inuit elements to the basic Ghillie, so it didn't look like a Ghillie, but hid them very well. As far as Bear was concerned, they passed. He called the exercise short, because he had to get back to Josh's training. Jake and Diane spent the rest of the day shooting at the range, and soon Diane's groups were right down where Jake said they would be. Her 600 yard groups were less than 4 inches, and her 1,000 yard groups were averaging 8 inches, which was good enough for their purposes. During the week when he wasn't flying they worked out at the pistol range, swam in the pool, and hit the weight room. Jake was amazed at how big his little brother was getting. The little pipsqueak was up to bench pressing 200 pounds, and he only weighed 180 soaking wet. Jake decided to hit the weight pile too, and while he didn't go to the extremes his younger brother did, Diane liked the results. She went to an aerobics class while the boys hit the weight pile. Josh asked Jake if he wanted to

start running with him, suggesting that if he could outrun the hunter he was with, he might have a better chance of surviving a bear attack. Jake agreed, and went running with him several times a week when he wasn't flying, and started practicing with his Colt Anaconda. Jake and Josh spent their free time working out together, and Josh even got Jake to start swimming laps instead of splashing around in the pool. He wasn't the fastest swimmer, but like he said, he wasn't going to get chased by a great white any time soon.

His shooting with his Colt Anaconda was pretty darn good, but not as good as his Dad. Still, any bears in the neighborhood that picked a fight with him had better make sure their life insurance was paid up first. He wore his double-shoulder holster with the 22/45 and the Colt Anaconda whenever he flew, and especially when he was guiding or flying to the lodge. He bought an SU-16 for a plane gun, and installed all the survival gear his dad recommended. Since he was already a State Paramedic, he had a complete medical kit, including the liquid oxygen delivery equipment with the plane. He carried a 2-meter handy-talkie that connected to the cross-band repeater in his plane, as well as a cell phone with a cellular repeater in the plane as well. Jake was starting to fly for Allakaket Airlines first, since Hunting Season didn't start for another month. First he was flying 2-3 times a week flying the "grocery run" to keep the General Store stocked, and to stock up for the orders the lodges would be placing in another couple of weeks. Soon he was flying passengers as well, from both Anchorage and Fairbanks. He was glad for the practice, because he needed to develop confidence and smoothness flying paying passengers. His dad had told him about how nervous he was when he first started flying paying passengers, Jake decided to use the "Welcome to Allakaket Airlines" speech as well, except, in this case it was true. Allakaket Airlines had their logo, and the Alaska Airlines as well painted on all SuperGoose owned by Allakaket Airlines. Alaska Airlines was nice enough to pay for the logos. Ron thought it was awfully white of them, especially since it was free advertising for Alaska Airlines. The first time he used it, Jake was wearing an Allakaket Airlines ball cap and shirt. He picked up several passengers from Fairbanks who were returning to Allakaket, helped them get seated, made sure their luggage was secure, then started the preflight, then he flipped his headset to PA.

"This is your pilot, Jake Williams, and I'd like to welcome you to Allakaket Airlines. We'll be flying at 2,000 feet, and be landing in Allakaket in a little over an hour. Please make sure your seatbelts are fastened and your seats are in the upright and locked position in preparation for take-off. Thank you for flying Allakaket Airlines."

He could hear laughter through the bulkhead, and knew he had struck the right chord. He took off smoothly; cruise climbed to 2,000 feet, and made a perfect landing an hour and a half later at Allakaket. He touched down with barely a splash, and taxied to the ramp. When he was at the passenger loading zone, he shut down and once the props had stopped spinning, he walked back into the passenger cabin, and unlocked the cabin door and extended the air stairs. "Watch your Step, and thank you for flying Allakaket Airlines." One elderly lady stopped in the aisle, and told him that she was one of Ron's first paying customers. He was good, but not as funny as his dad. He thanked her, and hustled outside to help her down the air stairs. "Thank you

young man - I've got it from here." Ron waited while the baggage handlers unloaded the aircraft, and he taxied to the fuel depot and filled up the tanks, then checked his schedule. He was finished flying for the day, so he taxied to the hangar. The maintenance supervisor handed Jake a note. He had an unscheduled flight to Anchorage with passengers, and he was the only available pilot. Jake shrugged and said "No rest for the weary!" He taxied back out to the loading area and was surprised to see Doc and Nelson, and Anne and Gene getting aboard. Doc explained that there was a new Gerontologist at Anchorage Regional and they had scheduled appointments at the last minute since he had the time, and wanted to get baselines on them. Doc said that they could either catch a flight back tomorrow, or he could wait for them in Anchorage later that evening. Since Doc was his boss, and Anne his grandma, he told Doc he'd wait for them, and gave him his cellular number. Once he had everyone seated, Jake gave his "Welcome to Allakaket Airlines" speech. He heard scattered laughter, and once they were airborne, he called Anchorage Regional for permission to land on their runway. The operations manager said to go ahead, they didn't have any emergency status flights right now, but they should consider Anchorage commercial as an alternate if he had to divert them.

"Roger Regional. I've got another hour before I'm committed. If you need to divert me to Commercial, just call me anytime in the next hour, and I can divert. I'll call back on approach."

"Roger Allakaket Airlines thanks. Regional Clear."

An hour later, Jake called on approach. "Regional this is Allakaket Airlines on Approach, do I have clearance to land."

"Roger Allakaket, clear to land, come straight in on 19."

"Roger, Regional, on final for 19, and thanks."

Jake chopped his throttle as soon as he was over the runway threshold, and the plane sank to the ground, and made a nice soft wheeled landing. He was getting pretty good at landing the big amphibian on its wheels. He coasted up to the main entrance, shut down, and opened the air stairs from the outside, in case anyone needed any assistance getting down. Every time someone stepped onto the tarmac, he said "Thanks for Flying Allakaket Airlines, have a nice day."

Doc was the last person off, and told Jake that when Ron first gave the "welcome to Allakaket Airlines" speech, it was a lot funnier; then again he was flying a DeHaviland bush plane. "Jake, if you do this good flying hunters, you'll be really popular. Your dad made a pile of money at your age, and the main reason he was so busy was because he was so popular, and treated the customers like friends. Eventually Allakaket Airlines took over flying for all the lodges, and that's when your Dad decided to buy his first TurboGoose, and the rest you say, is history. Thanks for the flight, that was fun. See you later this afternoon. It's going to take most of the afternoon for them to get finished poking and prodding us I'm afraid. I've got your cellular

number. Ron said there was a really good sporting goods store in town he liked, here's the name of it. If you fly to Alaska Airline's VIP terminal, they might let you borrow a pickup for the afternoon."

Jake thanked Doc, and grabbed his cellular phone. "Dad, I'm in Anchorage, and Doc said it would take the rest of the afternoon to get done with their doctor's appointments, so he suggested I check out the Sporting Goods store. He said that if I park at Alaska Airlines VIP terminal, they might loan me a truck. You'll take care of it, thanks Dad!"

Jake walked over to the cabin door of the SuperGoose, climbed the stairs, secured the door, and walked forward to the pilot's seat. He started the engines, and once he was ready to fly, he called Anchorage Commercial, and requested permission to transit from Anchorage Regional. "Commercial, this is Allakaket Airlines SG13645 requesting permission to transit from Regional to Commercial."

"Roger Allakaket, we just received notice, and you're clear to land and taxi to the Alaska Airlines VIP terminal. Ground crew will show you your parking space."

"Roger Commercial, which way do I turn for the VIP terminal?"

"Make a left at the end of the runway, and follow the taxiway to its end. Big white building on the right that says Alaska Airlines. Follow signs for VIP terminal."

"Thanks Commercial, taking off now!"

Jake advanced the throttles, took off, and climbed to 500 feet while turning to enter the pattern at Anchorage Commercial Airport. 20 minutes later, he taxied up to the VIP terminal where a ground crewman directed him to a parking spot. Once he shut down, the crewman handed him a note and a set of keys.

"Jake, your dad called - I'm in the middle of some meetings or I'd come down and greet you personally. Nice to have another Williams flying for Allakaket Airlines. Bradley"

Next to the plane was a nice clean white diesel F-350 4x4 crew cab, so Jake opened the door and started the motor, then he went back to his plane, took off the shoulder holsters and secured the plane. He found a Thomas Guide in the glove box, and located the Sporting goods store. Half an hour later, he parked in front and walked in. When he found a salesman, he asked if Larry was still there. "I'm sorry, he died a couple of years ago, how may I help you."

"I'm Jake Williams, and my Dad told me to ask for Larry."

"Did you say Jake Williams - I'm Dave, the salesman that helped him when he first came here. Larry died suddenly, and they offered me the management job."

“Ok, does this mean I can get the family 20% discount?”

“Yes sir - the kind of money your dad spent definitely entitles any member of his family to the same discount.”

“Do you guys still have that Laser Tag room in back?”

“If you’re half as good as your dad, I’m in serious trouble.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon playing Laser Tag since business was slow. When they finished, Jake called it a draw, since they had basically won the same number of games. Dave told Jake he had something to show him, and they walked over to a counter display that had several GPS units on it. Dave picked one up and explained to Jake that it was a combination PDA and GPS unit. Jake didn’t see the use for the PDA feature, but was seriously interested in a color GPS he saw. It was the Magellan Meridian Color GPS. Dave said he’d sell him the upgrade kit with the US Topo CD, interface cable, and manual on CD for \$380, and he’d throw in the \$15 neoprene waterproof case and the cigarette lighter adapter if he bought the NiMh upgrade kit that included a wall charger for \$28, then he could take his 20% off that. Jake figured it out: \$408 less 20% was 326.40 plus tax. He told Dave that the amount was \$326.40 plus tax. Dave said that his father could do math like that in his head too. Jake asked if the 16mb chip would be enough to download the US Topo CD. Dave said he’d be lucky to be able to store the local area with a 16mb chip. For an extra 42 dollars, he’d suggest the 64mb chip instead, the cost for the 16mb chip was \$5, so he’d charge him the difference. Jake thought “380 plus 28 plus 37 equals \$445, minus 20% equals \$356.” He told Dave that would be \$356 plus tax, and for 30 dollars extra, it would be a good idea. He asked Dave if he could throw in a spare set of 4 AA NiMh batteries since they lived in Allakaket. Dave said he’d charge him cost, which was \$5 for the set of 4. Jake decided against it when he remembered that the General Store carried NiMh batteries, and they should be about the same. Dave went ahead and wrote up the sale, and Jake handed him his AMEX, signed the slip, then Dave bagged the order and handed Jake everything. Jake thanked Dave and walked out to the truck. Just then his cell phone rang. “Hello this is Jake.”

“Jake, it’s Doc. We just finished up at the hospital. We’re ready to go home.”

Jake saw that he was driving a crew cab truck, which should have plenty of room for everyone. “Doc, Alaska Airlines loaned me one of their crew-cab trucks. If everyone thinks it’s OK, it would be quicker to drive over there and pick you up instead of driving to the airport and flying there to pick you up.”

“Ok Jake, sounds good to me. See you out front in about 15 minutes.”

Jake opened the trusty Thomas Guide, and found out how to get to the hospital. He made it to the front entrance in 17 minutes, got out, and opened both passenger side doors. Gene helped

Anne up, and Nelson offered his arm to Doc, and they all got in ok. He drove back to the VIP terminal, and he parked next to the SuperGoose. Jake thought the plane looked cleaner than when he arrived, and a note on the cockpit door explained it all. Bradley had the plane washed while it was parked there since they were washing the other planes anyway - no charge. Jake thought that was nice, and opened the cabin door and helped everyone aboard, then made sure his bag was aboard with his new GPS. Doc asked if he could ride up front, and Jake said Yes, remembering that Doc held his private pilot's license, even though he hadn't flown in years. Doc sat in the co-pilot's seat, and buckled into the harness like an old pro. Jake handed him the spare headset, and talked him through the pre-flight checklist and the engine start sequence. Finally with both turbines idling, Jake flipped the intercom switch to PA and announced "Welcome to Allakaket Airlines for your return flight to Allakaket. If your destination is not Allakaket, you're on the wrong plane. Please fasten your seatbelts, and made sure your trays are stowed, and the seat is in the upright and locked position, and prepare for take-off."

He flipped the intercom back to cockpit and said "Pilot to co-pilot, ready for take-off?"

Doc looked around and said "Clear for Take-off!"

Jake flipped the switch to radio and contacted the tower.

"This is Allakaket Airlines Sierra Golf 13645 requesting take-off clearance."

"Getting formal on us Allakaket?"

Jake laughed and said "Never hurts to practice proper radio procedure, in case you've got an FAA inspector in the tower."

"Roger Allakaket, clear on Runway 17, have a good flight."

"Thank you tower, turning onto 17 now."

Once Jake turned onto the correct runway, he applied the brakes, advanced the throttles, and released the brakes. Once he was moving at 80 knots, he pulled the yoke back gently and cruise climbed to 2,000 feet and turned toward Allakaket. Once they were straight and level, Jake asked Doc if he wanted to take the controls. The look on Doc's face was priceless. Doc put his hands and feet on the controls and called "co-pilot's plane."

Jake said "Ok, Doc, straight and level for 1 hour, then the nav system will give you a programmed turn to the east to line up with the lake. If you want to land the plane you can, or I can take it."

"Young man, I've never landed a plane this big. You better do it!"

“OK Doc. I’ll take the landing. You can keep your hands and feet lightly on the yoke and pedals to feel what I’m doing.”

“Thanks Jake.”

An hour later, the Nav system beeped, indicating a turn to the right to set up for landing at Allakaket. Jake set up a gentle diving turn because he had to lose 1500 feet in 5 miles so he was on glide slope for his landing. He bottomed out of the turn at 500ft AGL and on the heading for Allakaket. “Allakaket Tower, this is SG13465 on final. Requesting permission to land.”

“Permission granted, pattern is clear. Contact tower when clear.”

“Roger tower.”

As Jake cleared the ridge, he chopped his throttles, held a 15 degree nose-up attitude as his speed bled off and he floated down to the lake. Just about 10 feet off the water, he pushed the nose forward and landed with a slight splash.

“Jake that was fun. You’re as good of a pilot as I remember your dad was at your age!”

“Thanks Doc!”

They taxied to the ramp, and Jake remembered to lower his landing gear so he could transition to land, and he rolled up to the passenger loading area, and shut down. He contacted the tower, and let them know he was clear, then turned off the power, and walked back to open the cabin door as the blades stopped spinning. Once everyone was on the ground, Doc took a moment to talk to Jake.

“I saw Doc Nichols today. He said I was in pretty good shape for my age, but he was worried about my heart. He said I had to take it easy from here on out, so this will probably be my last season at the lodge. I wanted to fly with you one last time before I completely retired. That was the most fun I’ve had since I flew with your dad.”

“Doc, any time you want to go flying, just let me know. My dad’s given me use of this SuperGoose when I’m not flying for Allakaket Airlines or the lodge.”

“Thanks Jake, I just might take you up on that! This time I think we’ll take the SuperGoose over to the lodge instead of the 007. I’d like to see what the approach to HelpmeJack Lake is like in this plane.”

“Ok Doc, but if the doctor said for you to take it easy, I just wanted to warn you the approach is pretty hairy and steep. Almost twice as steep as the approach to Allakaket. It’s kind of like

floating down on a parachute attached to a rock.”

“Well, we all gotta die sometime, might as well be doing something I enjoy instead of sitting home in a rocking chair listening to my arteries harden.”

“Make sure you tell Ralph and Sam just in case, so they make sure they spend plenty of time with you, especially with your grandsons. I never knew my Grandpa, since he died way before I was born, but Bert and Larry should have a chance to get to know you first.”

“You’re right Jake - As much as it pains me to think of myself as growing old, I have to make sure Bert and Larry get to spend some time with me. Take care - Nelson is waiting to drive me home.”

Chapter 65 - In Training

Bear told Josh that the SEALs used Navy Hospital Corpsman, who were more extensively trained than medics, and you couldn't just join the SEALs out of boot camp, you had to have a rate. What he needed to do was go through Boot Camp, kick ass on the Obstacle Course, PT and marksmanship quals, then try to get into an Iron Man competition somewhere in Southern California when he was on leave after he completed Hospital Corpsman school. If he did well, there were usually several SEALs running in the Ironman Triathlons, and if impressed a SEAL officer, he stood a good chance of getting a shot at becoming a SEAL. The triathlon included bicycle riding, but there weren't enough hard surface roads for him to practice on a road bike, so he'd have to make do with a mountain bike. Josh remembered his dad owned an old mountain bike that was in pretty good shape, and maybe he could borrow it. Bear said that riding the heavier bike would put him in excellent shape for riding the much lighter and quicker road bikes. But he was going to have to work even harder on his running and swimming. He needed to work on speed and endurance in the water. He suggested swimming in the lake at Allakaket, which would make any ocean water he swam in seem like a nice warm bathtub. He'd let Jake wait until the middle of summer when the lake warmed up over 40 degrees. Also Bear would have to upgrade his Martial arts training, and build an obstacle course for him to practice on. Bear wanted one at the Survival school anyway for a while, now he had an excuse.

Bear e-mailed George in Atlanta, who had a PDF file showing the layout of an older SEAL obstacle course. He called Ron, and got permission to build an obstacle course for Alaska Survival, and enlisted Josh and Jake, and Tom and Gary to help him build it. The Super Stallion delivered several hundred recycled railroad ties and 8-inch lag bolts. He bought a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch industrial drill to drill holes and drive the lag bolts. They hauled sand to make a safe landing zone, and started assembling the obstacle course. Bear told him the obstacle course wasn't as tough as the BUDS course, but was significantly tougher than the Basic Training course. They strung a cargo net 20 feet in the air, built 2 walls, a 6-foot wall without a rope, and a 12-foot wall with a knotted rope. They built a rope slide between 2 tall poles 30 feet apart, with a climbing rope to get up, and another to get down. They assembled a series of poles dug into the ground at various heights that you had to jump to/from combined with a log walk that included uphill and downhill sections. Bear said the tough part was if you fell off the log walk/jump sequence you had to start over at the start.

Josh started testing the equipment shortly after it was installed. Bear had an aggressive training regiment for him. One day of the obstacle course, the next day running, the next biking, and for variety he swam every other day. The sixth day he lifted weights. Bear decided to let Josh rest on the 7th day, because if God took a day off, he'd get one too! When Jake wasn't flying or guiding, he was working out with his brother, pushing him as hard as he could. Bear played SEAL Instructor, and alternately praised and cursed them. Josh realized that there was some major truth to the expression "Swears like a Chief!" Josh became pretty good on the mountain bike, and sometimes when Jake had to fly to Anchorage to pick up customers, he dropped Josh

off in the morning with his mountain bike in Anchorage, and when he came back that evening to pick him up, he usually had 50-100 miles on the odometer. Josh liked the residential streets in Anchorage, he could pedal much faster and easier on pavement than on the ratty trails he had in Allakaket. He'd bring a daybag, usually a Camelback Mule full of water, bananas, a PBJ sandwich, first aid kit, cell phone (in case he got in an accident and was too hurt to make it back to the airport.) and his helmet. Josh mapped out routes that varied terrain and distance, avoiding major congested roads whenever possible. Josh was becoming a very strong swimmer, and his speed was improving too. He still shot every now and then on Sunday, either with a scoped M - 25 or an open-sighted AR-15 to simulate what he'd have to do to earn a top score in marksmanship at Basic Training. He also did calisthenics including push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks, and chin-ups. Bear had found out through the grapevine what the best scores on the PT tests were, and set goals for Josh to beat every one of them. The only one he really was having trouble with was the run speed. He could run distances, but not fast. A quarter-mile was the farthest he could run fast, beyond that, he went into a marathon pace that he could run a whole marathon at. As the year progressed, he was running 25 miles on his run days, biking 50 miles on his biking days, and swimming 2 miles for his swim day. As his 18th birthday got closer, Gene gave Josh the good news, He'd been accepted into the new Seal Challenge program as a Medical Special Operations Technician candidate, which required a 6-year enlistment. He looked up the webpage on the Seal Challenge, and found a Contract overview PDF file <http://www.sealchallenge.navy.mil/seal/pdf/contractoverview.pdf>

The requirements for the Physical Skills Test was a cakewalk compared to the workouts that Bear already had him doing. He realized Bear was preparing him for BUDS, which was grueling, exhausting, and painful. This Seal Challenge program seemed to be much easier than the way they were planning on doing it. Josh wondered if there were a PADI diving program in San Diego that he could get into before he reported to San Diego for BUDS, so he'd already have his PADI cert, his State Paramedic cert, and his Commercial pilot's license. If there was some way to enroll in a jump school, he'd check into that too! Now that he had a firm enlistment day 2 weeks after his 18th birthday, he e-mailed the State Medical Board to petition for an early test date, since he was enlisting in the US Navy after his 18th birthday, and would be in Great Lakes, MI when he was originally scheduled to take the test. The head of the Paramedic program recognized his last name, and realized that he was Jake's younger brother, and Jake had passed the written exam with the highest score in 10 years. He knew all the Paramedic candidates coming out of Allakaket were being trained by an ER Doc and an ER Surgeon who really knew their stuff. He replied that if Josh could get to Alaska Regional tomorrow to do his 2-week internship/training period, he could take the test when he satisfactorily passed his internship/training period. Josh called for his dad, and Ron told him to go for it, and he'd arrange for Jake to fly him to Anchorage first thing tomorrow. Josh packed his bag for a 2-week stay in Anchorage, and packed his medical books too. He got to bed early, because he'd heard they worked long hours and he'd need his sleep.

Ron called Jake, who agreed in a minute to help out Josh. He'd miss his younger brother, and was grateful for the excellent shape he was in now. Diane was always complimenting him

about his physique, and he tried not to let it go to his head. Bear told him that when Josh left, he'd have to keep the training up, so he wasn't getting off easy. Diane started training with them. She couldn't run too far, but was a real good swimmer. Jake and Diane would continue their training program after Josh left, but at a lower intensity level. Jake flew Josh to Anchorage the next morning, and Josh started his internship at the hospital. They issued him a set of greens to wear, and a yellow coat, indicating that he was a Paramedic Trainee, which meant he was to observe procedures unless a qualified trainer was teaching him how to do a procedure. 2 weeks later he was hooked, and knew that he was going to do what he wanted to do the rest of his life, when he observed a GSW victim, and how the doctors and surgeons worked to save his life. The head of Emergency medicine gave him a certificate, and he called the testing office, then caught a lift to the office to take the State Paramedic license test. Several hours later, he finished, and the proctor shook his head when he scored Josh's test. Just like his brother, he only missed 2 questions. The average candidate that passed missed at least 10 questions out of the 500 question battery. He issued a temporary State Paramedic's license, and said the permanent license would be mailed to his home in the next week or so. He took Josh's picture to go on the ID, and told him he was finished. Josh grabbed his cell phone, and found out Jake would be at the Anchorage Commercial terminal in about an hour, and he'd wait for him. Josh caught a cab, and met his brother at the terminal right as he finished loading up. They talked on the way home about the licensing procedures and funny stuff that happened in the hospital.

When he got home, Josh called Bear and gave him the good news. He asked if it would help if he had a PADI diving cert when he enlisted. Bear said it wouldn't be worth the trouble, since the Navy didn't recognize the PADI cert anyway. He told Josh that he'd be better served by swimming in the lake as much as possible to get used to cold water, because the water off Coronado could be cold. Josh was afraid he was going to say something like that, but decided that Bear knew what he was talking about. Josh knew that the SEALs used cold water to break the morale of the weaker trainees and weed them out. By the time he got to San Diego, the 60 degree water of San Diego Bay would seem like bathwater to him. Every time he went swimming in the lake he came out blue, but he didn't feel as cold anymore. Bear's training tactic was working. He started running no more than 2 miles at a time, and picked up the pace until he was running 2 miles in 14 minutes, which wasn't the fastest time, but he didn't have to be the fastest anymore. The 500-yard swim would be a cakewalk, since Bear made him swim a mile in the lake every time he swam. Bear motored along in a safety boat next to him while Josh froze various parts of his anatomy off. Bear found out about the Superfrog triathlon which was held 2 weeks before Josh's scheduled BUDS school started, and he should be on leave then. Bear told Josh about it, and he was all excited, so Bear signed him up and paid the registration fee. Since it was cheaper for enlisted Naval personnel, and there were more openings, Bear signed him up as an enlisted personnel, since he would have completed Basic by then.

Josh's 18th birthday was bittersweet for Nancy, who knew her boy had grown up and was about to enter the Navy. Josh wasn't too worried about it, and was cuddling in the corner of the room

with his girlfriend of the month. He knew that if he wanted to get into the SEALs, he couldn't be married, or have any other distractions, so he didn't get serious about any single girl. They thought he was so good looking that they didn't mind anyway. Josh was now a sandy blonde, about 5-10 and 190 pounds of solid muscle. He was bench-pressing 220 pounds, butterfly curling 40 pounds, and was lifting 100 pounds on the leg extension, and 300 pounds in the squat position on the universal machine. To quote Bill Murray in Stripes, he was a "Lean Mean fighting machine!" As a Special Forces Medical Technician, his job was to save lives, but he could also take them if the team came under fire to protect his teammates. When it came time to open presents, Josh was stunned when he opened a small envelope with a passbook in it. There was a note inside "Josh, now that you're 18, you've reached the age the Trust Fund stipulated to disburse funds. The money in this passbook is the proceeds of that trust fund. Even though it's enough that you could live on the interest for the rest of your life, knowing that you don't have to work gives you the freedom to do what you want with your life. Love, Mom & Dad" When he opened the passbook and read the amount, he almost fainted. The savings account had a balance of over \$5 Million! He slipped from the grasp of his current girlfriend, and walked over to his Mom and Dad, and gave them both a big hug. Ron said his other present was in the driveway.

He opened the door, and there stood a brand-new full-size black Diesel Hummer. He opened the door, and the keys were in it, and the key fob was his name. He took the keys out of the ignition and ran back into the house and gave his parents another big hug. Jake gave him a GPS unit just like his, and Sarah gave him a cellular phone that would work anywhere in the world with 500 pre-paid minutes, with a note attached "ET Phone home every once in a while! Love Sis" Josh picked Sarah up, spun her around, then set her down and kissed her cheek. "Thanks Sis, you're the best. I'll try to keep in touch whenever I'm not restricted." Sarah realized her older brother might not be able to call home all the time, especially if he were on a mission. Her fiancé was sitting next to her, and looking uncomfortable. Finally he stood and shook Josh's hand. "Good luck and be careful." Sarah had just announced their engagement last week, right after he got offered a permanent position working in the mine. She was already wearing her diamond, and the small stone gleamed in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Josh would sure miss this, but like the recruiting poster said "It's Not a Job- It's an Adventure!" David gave his big brother a copy of the Special Forces Medical Handbook. When he opened the cover, it read "Bring them all home, Love David" He walked over to David and said he'd try, and gave him a hug. "See you later bro - take care of things for me while I'm gone!"

"Does this mean I can drive the Hummer?"

"What are you - Nuts?"

"I take that as a NO."

"More like Heck NO!" Josh grabbed his younger brother, and gave him an "Indian rub" on his

scalp. Since David was half the size of Josh, he knew that “resistance was futile” and didn’t bother.

2 weeks later, he was on a plane to Chicago. He arrived in O’Hare without any problems, and found the USO office to check in. Like Bear had told him the RDC on the bus to Recruit Training Command was the nicest RDC there. He made sure never to address an RDC as Sir or Ma’am, usually Chief was the correct way to address an RDC. He had Bill set up an account for him in Allakaket with ATM/Debit access, so he could direct deposit his military pay, and have access to funds as soon as he needed them unlike the other poor recruits that had to wait 4 weeks for their ATM cards through the NFCU. Just like Bear had told him, Basic was a walk in the park. Since his hair was already short, the haircut didn’t amount to much, and thanks to Bear’s training and advice, he was soon the top trainee in the class. He was totally squared away, never talked without permission, and saluted like he was born a sailor. When they started the PT, not only was he the top of his class, but he was so far ahead of 99% of them that the instructors asked him to do more, just to see how much he could do. In-processing was the hardest part of boot camp, because there was always someone who wasn’t with the program. He was issued his smurfs, and couldn’t wait to get his first uniform issue, since he hated the baggy sweats. The first couple of days he didn’t sleep much at all. Finally he got assigned to a Recruit Division, and met his instructor for the next 7 weeks, Chief Washburn. He impressed Chief Washburn so much that he made Josh the Division’s Recruit Chief Petty Officer. Chief Washburn handed him a collar device designating him the Recruit CPO, and a list of things he was responsible for.

During the first week he easily passed his 3rd Class Swimming test, and asked to take the 2nd Class swim test, which he easily passed. He wanted to take the first class test, but didn’t have a Red Cross or YMCA Life Saving certificate. He made the mistake of asking the RDC if a State Paramedic’s license counted, and the RDC made him swim a 100-yard freestyle as fast as he could as punishment, thinking it would take him 5 minutes. When Josh pulled up after less than 2 minutes, the RDC thought he cheated until the lifeguard told him that Josh was one of the fastest recruits he’d seen in a while. The RDC got him out of the water and asked him where he learned to swim like that. Josh explained he wanted to get to the SEAL Challenge, and Master Chief Simmons had been training him for over a year, including swimming a mile every other day in 40 degree water.

“Recruit, where the hell did you find 40-degree water?”

“I’m from Alaska Chief.”

The RDC asked Josh if he wanted to take the First Class swim test anyway, since he was such a good swimmer. Josh said he’d like to try with the chief’s permission. He told Josh the test included proficiency in the freestyle, sidestroke, breast stroke, and elementary back stroke. Josh asked him if that was the Back Crawl, and the chief explained it was an elementary stroke with a frog kick, and a sweeping stroke on the back. Josh nodded understanding. It was one of the

strokes Bear had shown him that the Navy wanted him to know. He asked Josh how good at underwater swimming he was. Josh said he could clear over half the length of the pool in 1 breath. The RDC told Josh to get in the water and start swimming. Half an hour later, the chief was signing off on his 1st Class swim test, shaking his head as he did so. He'd have to meet this Master Chief Simmons, he trained this recruit well. Josh neglected to tell the RDC that Chief Simmons was a SEAL instructor.

Josh spent the rest of the week learning core values, rate/rank recognition, rape awareness, and other stuff, when he wasn't marching. As the Division RCPO, he was either at the front of the Division, or riding dog, depending on where the RDC wanted him. The first week's PT was a breeze for Josh, and he spent most of his time motivating recruits. Chief Washburn was pleased that Josh was taking a leadership role, and leading by example instead of bossing people. During the second week there was more classroom stuff, PT and marching. The final event of the week was an indoor confidence course. Chief Washburn decided to put Josh's leadership skills to the test, and assigned him 3 of the biggest losers and screw-ups in the division. The confidence course was designed to simulate a ship-board emergency, including donning Oxygen Breathing Apparatus, carry sandbags, and crawl through tiny openings while wearing all their gear. Chief Washburn was amazed when his bunch of screw-ups finished in the middle of the pack, and finished as a team. Later he asked Josh how he did it, and Josh said he told them this one was for pride. If they finished together and in the middle of the pack, he'd be proud of them. Chief Washburn hadn't considered that angle, and congratulated Josh for a job well done. The next week was their first PST. Josh had confided in Chief Washburn that he had applied to the Seal Challenge, and needed outstanding scores to be selected. Chief Washburn told him he'd do what he could. He had to make sure as many good recruits qualified, and the "gazelles" had to take care of themselves. Chief Washburn did help later, when he gave Josh a slip showing competitive PST scores for the SEALs. Josh knew he could easily beat all of them. The next morning, he started at the pool, and decided to set an example for the rest of the recruits, and swam his fastest 500 yard swim he ever had. His final time was 8:00 flat. When he climbed out of the pool, the recruits were cheering him. Next he went to the push-ups stage, and the object was to do as many push-ups as possible in 2 minutes. Josh wanted to do at least 80. The tester said "GO" and Josh started doing pushups as fast as he could. He did 82 before the tester said "Stop" and recorded the number. After a 2 minute rest, it was the Sit-ups next. He knew that he needed at least 80 in 2 minutes. He'd have to work hard to make it. They laid a padded mat down for the sit-ups, which Josh knew would help him. He hyperventilated for the 30 seconds before they were ready to start, then he lay on the mat, and an RDC held his feet and would count for him. The tester said "GO" and Josh brought his elbows to his knees and back down as fast as he could. When the 2 minutes were up, he thought he was going to be sick. He told himself "Suck it up! You can do this - BUDS is going to be worse!" He walked to the chin-up bar, and since he had no time limit, did a dead hang for 30 seconds while he caught his breath, then started chinning up. He stopped at 15, knowing he needed to save energy for the mile and a half run. According to the paper the chief had given him, he needed to beat 10:20. He had run 2 miles in 14 minutes before, so he could do it physically.

He showed up at the track wearing BDU pants, a tee-shirt, and his boots. When the timer said “Go” Jake started running just slightly faster than his 2-mile pace, since he only had to go a mile and a half. Since it was a ¼ mile track, that meant 6 laps. He felt he had enough energy left after his 5th lap to kick the pace a little, so he did. By the end of the final lap, he was one hurting puppy, but when he checked his time, it was worth it - 9:54! He had done it. Since he had clobbered the requirements, he knew that he should probably be accepted for BUDS. He took the ASVAB before he signed his enlistment papers, and scored 120 points, which he knew was more than the required 104 points. Since he didn’t have a high school diploma, but a GED, they made him take another test, and he blew it away too. All he had to do was finish Basic with honors, and it was on to BUDS.

Josh had forgotten about the rest of Basic Training, and was soon practicing tying knots. Since Sam had shown him how to suture using a pig’s foot, he found the knot tying to be easy, and helped any recruits who needed it. Chief Washburn was really proud of Josh, since most of the “gazelles” that breezed through basic didn’t take the time to help teach the other recruits, and to be so humble about it. He wrote a glowing report and made sure it made it into Josh’s file. If he made it through BUDS and Hospital Corpsman school, he was recommending he should be selected for OCS, since he already demonstrated leadership abilities the Navy desperately needed. He took his report to the Senior RDC, who agreed with Chief Washburn’s assessment. Josh’s achievements and leadership had been noticed by other RDC’s. He wrote another note and attached it to the letter, seconding the recommendation that Josh be selected for OCS if he made it OK through BUDS and corpsman school. The rest of Basic was a blur until Battle Stations. PT-2 came up, and since he had already scored high enough to qualify for the SEALs, he used his second attempt to motivate several recruits who were right on the ragged edge of not qualifying. He ran with the slower recruits instead of running with the gazelles, and urged, cajoled, and basically did whatever it took to keep them at a pace that would ensure they would pass. There wasn’t much he could do to help them with the push-ups, chin-ups and sit-ups that the other RDC’s weren’t already doing. The Master Chief in charge of the RDC’s, Chief Hernandez, noted that Josh threw away a chance to better his scores in the PST to help other recruits, and wrote another report for Josh’s file. Where some recruit’s files were full of reprimands and other dunning reports, Josh’s was full of glowing reports about how he performed his duties as the RCPO, and had sacrificed any chance to better his score on the PST to get several marginal recruits qualified. Chief Hernandez was worried that he had given Josh’s career as a SEAL the kiss of death, since they were extra hard on anyone who might be a SEAL Officer at some time because they were to lead the rest of the SEALs.

Chapter 66 - Battle Stations

2200 Monday, first day of week 7

The lights in the barracks flashed on, the RDC's were blowing whistles and beating on trashcans "General Quarters - up and out of your racks. Get dressed right now - MOVE IT!" Josh was expecting this, as was able to get dressed quickly and run outside to muster his division. He knew he was in for 12 hours of intensive drills designed to simulate famous historical incidents, including the sinking of the USS Oklahoma at Pearl Harbor, the 1967 fire and explosion aboard the aircraft carrier USS Forrestal, and another scenario involved going into a smoke-filled room to find a team member. Each scenario was accomplished as a team. In most scenarios they were geared up in a smoky room, and they always had to work as a team. Josh declined a leadership role in the Battle Stations scenarios, saying that other recruits should get a chance to lead. Josh thought the Shaft Alley rescue was the toughest, since the team had to hoist a 185 pound dummy secured on a litter through a vertical shaft, through an obstacle course all without dropping or banging the "victim". The group leader the RDC picked did very well, listened to his shipmates, and they came up with an excellent plan for solving the scenario. The Forrestal scenario was tough too, since they had to get their entire team through a small circular hatch without touching the sides, which in the scenario were supposed to be hot enough to deliver a serious burn. Basically they formed a human chain, and passed everyone through the portal. Josh was glad he was fairly tall and skinny since shorter, heavier recruits had a real problem with the small hatch. As they moved from scenario to scenario, they double-timed it. They learned a little Naval history at each scenario, learned teamwork, and learned to think creatively. The final ceremony of Battle Stations was when the recruits were awarded their Navy ball caps, symbolically changing from Recruits to Sailors.

0930 the next morning came none too soon for Josh, who fell into his rack exhausted. While he slept, he dreamt about the Weapons training during Week 4. He fired an M -16 that had been retrofitted with a laser, and Chief Washburn just shook his head when after firing 1 shot to confirm his zero, put the rest of the rounds in the 100-yard x-ring according to the scoring computer. He didn't have any more trouble with the shotgun either, and when out to the live fire range, where he easily qualified as Sharpshooter. Chief Washburn took him off the line, and talked with him. The story Josh told made Chief Washburn's chin hit his chest. This kid had been in training since before his 16th birthday, owned a Springfield Armory M -25 that he could shoot 3-4 inch groups at 600 yards with, and was trained by a retired SEAL Instructor, who just turned out to be Master Chief "Bear" Simmons from the JSOC command at MacDill AFB. Bear was legendary among the Navy chiefs. He asked Josh if he wanted to switch his MOS to Sniper, but Josh said he'd rather patch them up then kill them. When Chief Washburn heard that Josh was also a State Certified Paramedic and a licensed Commercial Pilot, he asked Josh when his cape was coming out of the cleaners.

Josh said "My dad makes me look like an amateur!"

“Who’s your dad?”

“Ron Williams.”

“Whoa - wait a minute, this is too much of a coincidence! You’re Ron Williams Son?”

“You’ve heard of him?”

“I’ve got friends in Delta that still talk about that target hanging in their club at MacDill. Is what they said true, your dad was only 13 when he put on that shooting exhibition?”

“That’s what Bear, excuse me Chief Simmons told me.”

“You call Master Chief Simmons “Bear?”

“He’s been retired for years, and he decided that Chief was too formal, especially since his boss Gene Shepard retired there too.”

“Now you’re telling me that General Gene Shepard, the retired JSOC lives in Allakaket Alaska?”

“Yes Chief Washburn, and my Great Uncle Steve Fellows lives there too.”

“Oh, are you sure you’re not telling me a tall tale - Col. Steve Fellows is your Great Uncle?”

“I wouldn’t lie to you Chief. If you’ve got a pen and paper, I’ll give you Bear’s number in Alaska, and you can ask him.” Chief Washburn pulled out his notepad and a pen, and Josh recited Bear’s number from memory. “907- 387-2259 Sometimes when he’s tired he still answers his phone like he did at MacDill.”

2 days later, Josh ran into Chief Washburn again. He had a bemused smile on his face, and he asked Josh to accompany him to his office. When they sat down and closed the door, Chief Washburn said “Young man, I owe you an apology. Chief Simmons straightened me out on a few things, with a minimum of swearing, so he wasn’t mad. The main thing he wanted to know was how you were doing. When I told him, you could hear the pride in his voice. Anyway, I just wanted to congratulate you, and wish you good luck and God speed.”

When they stood, Chief Washburn extended his hand, and Josh shook it, then returned to Attention. When Chief Washburn said “dismissed” he turned and marched out the door.

When Josh awoke the next morning, he wondered why he had a big grin on his face, then got up and got dressed, then mustered the division in preparation to marching to the mess hall. The food wasn’t too bad, but different than he was used to. Josh was really disappointed with his

Beretta 9mm. It felt like a popgun, and wasn't nearly as accurate as the ParaOrd P-14 he left at home. When he complained to Chief Washburn that he couldn't hold a decent group with the Berretta, he asked Josh what he normally shot. He said that when he shot pistol in the town's indoor range, he could shoot a 10-ring group at 25-yards with his personal Para-Ordinance P-14 Limited. Chief Washburn had good news for him. If he made it to the SEALs, and he had an understanding CO, he could ditch the Beretta and carry his P-14 as his personal weapon. Josh had another reason to make it through BUDS now, if he didn't, he'd be stuck carrying that POS Beretta M-9 for the next 6 years. The P-14 carried 14 rounds of .45acp which was the round to carry if you were stuck shooting FMJ ammo, because at least it made bigger holes going through. He spent the rest of week 7 in classroom training when they weren't marching or doing PT. He learned about Navy History, grooming standards, and anti-terrorism measures. He hoped that as a SEAL he'd have a more active role in Anti-terrorism. The September 11th bombings really upset him.

During the 8th week, he started his administrative out-processing, received his orders to BUDS, which included the expected 2 weeks of in-transit leave, so he could compete in the Superfrog triathlon on Coronado Island right before BUDS. They received some final classroom study on Core Values, then practiced for the Graduation Ceremony. Chief Washburn took Josh aside, and told him he had a choice to make. As the top recruit in his division, he could either march at the head of the formation carrying the division flag, or next to him as the Division Recruit Chief Petty Officer. Josh responded that he wasn't there for the Glory - his goal was to make it into the SEALs, and he'd be proud to march in review next to the chief. Chief Washburn was proud of Josh, and told the #2 recruit that he would march at the head of the division formation. Josh was in for a surprise when his Mom and Dad showed up for graduation. He didn't see them until after his division was dismissed. Ron gave his son a big hug, and Nancy cried. Chief Washburn saw them, and once he had greeted his parents, Chief Washburn walked up, and Josh introduced them. He stunned Josh by saying "Mr. Williams, may I shake your hand. I always wanted to meet you after hearing of your exploits at MacDill. Sir, you should be very proud of your son. He was the top recruit, but elected to march next to me as the Recruit Chief Petty Officer instead."

"Thanks, Chief. Bear gave us a heads-up after your call. Yes, you're right, we're very proud of Josh. Bear told me he's been accepted to BUDS in 2 weeks."

"Yes sir, 5 of our recruits were accepted to BUDS, and he had the highest scores of all of them."

"Thank you Chief, nice meeting you!"

Chief Washburn turned to Nancy, tipped his hat and said "Ma'am." then turned and left. He had other recruit's parents to see. Ron, Nancy, and Josh visited for a while, and Ron said that his brothers and sister said hi, and wished they could have come, but seats were limited. When it came time to leave, Ron and Nancy hugged their son, and said they'd see him at BUDS graduation. That afternoon, he boarded an aircraft bound for San Diego. He checked in early at

the SEAL training base at Coronado Island, and received permission to compete in the Superfrog, since he was still on leave, and had already registered. There was a note from Bear to be expecting something soon. The next day Bear showed up at the gate, he'd flown MAC from Elmendorf to NAS North Island, which was the closest airbase to the SEAL command on Coronado. One of the instructors met him at North Island, and they caught up on old times. Bear had to pick up a huge package which he told his buddy contained a purpose-built triathlon bike, and all the gear necessary to compete in Superfrog. His buddy laughed and said "Aren't you a little old for that Bear?"

He laughed and said "It's not for me. I've been working with this kid to get him ready for BUDS, and when he heard that Superfrog was this week, he decided to compete. He just finished basic, and should be on Transit leave until the next class starts."

"Cool, we could use more gung-ho kids in the SEALS."

Bear remembered that his buddy wasn't involved in BUDS training anymore, at least as a direct instructor, and told him Josh's story.

"Impressive kid, Bear - I hope he makes it. I won't say anything to the other instructors, because I don't want to jinx his chances of making it. I can't believe you made him swim in 40 degree water. Sometimes the medical officers make us curtail our water activities when the water gets too cold in winter to avoid killing a recruit by hypothermia. You had him swimming a mile in 40 degree water? What were you thinking?"

"If he could handle 40 degree water, the 60 degree water around here would seem like a bathtub to him - I just wanted to stack the deck in his favor because I remember how much you Sadists liked to freeze us half to death in the ocean to get us to quit."

"Sounds like you might be on to something Bear, we'll see in 4 weeks if it worked."

They drove onto the base, and Josh was stunned to see Bear getting out of a Humvee, and manhandle a huge box out of the back. He yelled at Josh to give him some help, and he double-timed it over there. They took the box into Visitor's quarters, where they'd stashed Josh until his class, and Bear opened the box. Josh was amazed to see the frame and wheels of a purpose built triathlon bike, and all the rest of the gear he needed to compete in Superfrog. They spent the rest of the day assembling and fitting the bike. Finally Josh tried on his Triathlon uniform, and followed the Humvee around the base to try out the bike. Bear got permission to take Josh off the base for some road work, and get him up to speed with the road bike. They drove up and down the Silver strand until Josh was exhausted. Bear was amazed at how fast Josh could ride that bike behind the Hummer. Since he was used to a bike that weighed almost twice as much, Josh was able to cruise at 25 mph, sprint to 40mph, and hold 30 mph for short distances. Finally they put the bike up, and introduced Josh to the Pacific Ocean. It took him a while to adjust to the open ocean until Bear joined him and showed him the rough water crawl. It was a

variation on the Australian Crawl that kept you from swallowing too much water. They spent the rest of the day swimming inside and outside the surf zone, learning how to time and attack the waves, since they had to start on the beach, run out into the deep water, and swim out to a pylon and back for the water portion of the race. The swim was divided into 2 1,000-yard open ocean swims, separated by two 100-yard runs in soft sand, so Bear's next task was to teach Josh how to run in soft sand. They ran and jogged up and down the beach, and Bear ran Josh up and down some sand dunes to build his endurance. At the end of the day, Josh hurt in muscles he didn't even know he had. The bike ride was 5 11-mile laps around the base on flat but varying surfaces ranging from smooth to rough. Josh knew he could handle the rough stuff, since he had all that practice on his mountain bike. The Speed Demons might get ahead of him on the smooth sections, but he should catch them in the rough stuff. The part that Josh dreaded was the 13-mile run on sand, varying between hard and soft sand. He hoped to finish in the middle of the pack, but just wanted to finish. Josh was competing in the male 18-29 class on the 20th, which was 3 days away. Bear told Josh to load up on the carbs for the next couple of days, but not to overeat, and to make sure he ate plenty of bananas since he'd need the potassium.

Josh lined up on the beach the morning of the 20th, and Lt.(SEAL) Moki Martin (ret.) held the starter's pistol for the run/swim event. With the crack of the pistol, 100 competitors raced through the sand to the ocean. Ron was in the first group to hit the water, and managed to swim the first leg in fairly good position. The water was cold and rough, but not any rougher than when they had practiced further south at the Silver Strand. He lost 2 positions during the 100-yard sand run, but caught them in the ocean. When they swam back in, there was another 100-yard run to the transition area. Josh had an easy transition since he was already wearing a triathlon suit, and slipped into his cycling/running shoes, climbed aboard his bike, and headed out for the first lap. He made up 2 positions in the transition area due to his top-notch triathlon equipment. He maintained his position during the first lap, then during the second lap, was passed by a group of 5 faster riders. Since he was on smooth road, he didn't try to keep up, and caught them when the pavement turned rough. He decided to use the group ahead of him to break the wind and save his strength, so he didn't pass them, since they would probably take off again once they were on smooth pavement. At the end of lap 1, he grabbed a bottle of Gatorade from Bear, who was there to cheer him on, and keep him hydrated. He had 2 water bottles on his frame, but the Gatorade helped. At the end of each lap, Bear held up a sign showing his overall position, and handed him a bottle of Gatorade every other lap.

The end of the 5th lap ended in the transition area, and all Josh had to do was secure his bike and start running. The run course was 13 miles long, broken up into 6 2.2-mile laps that varied between hard pack and soft sand. They quickly transitioned to sand, and soon were in deep sand. He gutted it out, and made up for lost time on the hard-packed sand. After the first lap, he was glad to see Bear, who held up a sign that said he was 5th in class, and 25th overall, then handed him a bottle of Gatorade. Josh inhaled most of it as he headed back onto the sand. At the end of lap #2, Bear's signboard said he was 6th in class and 30th overall. He wondered who had passed him, and decided to speed up slightly. At the end of the 3rd lap, his extra speed paid off, he was back in 5th, and 25th overall. He didn't know if he could keep up this pace, and

hoped the other runners were tiring too. By the end of the 4th lap, Bear's sign had him still in 5th and 24th overall. He grabbed a paper cup full of Gatorade, and kept running. Right in the middle of the 5th lap, he narrowly avoided catastrophe, when 2 runners ahead of him collided and went down. He had to jump over them, since he was too close to swerve around them. He landed on his feet, and kept running. The signboard at the end of lap five reflected the accident, he was 4th in class, and 22nd overall. He grabbed another cup of Gatorade from Bear, and knowing that he only had 1 more lap to complete, kicked the speed up. He could see the finish line just ahead of him at the end of lap 6, and willed himself across it, then collapsed into the sand. Bear helped him back up, and helped him walk it off. Bear told him that he thought that Josh had finished 4th in class, and 20th overall. Once the last racer crossed the line half an hour later, they gathered around Lt. Martin, who was reading numbers off his clipboard that corresponded to the racer's entry numbers. He finally got to Josh's number, and confirmed Bear's evaluation. Bear gave Josh one of his trademark Bear hugs, then they went to the tent and sat in the shade. 15 minutes later, Josh was looking up into the face of Moki Martin. Josh stood up, and Moki said "I heard you're a new Seaman Recruit, and you applied for BUDS. Bravo Zulu son, and good luck in BUDS." Moki stuck out his hand and shook Josh's. Then he turned to Bear "Long time no see Chief. I see your protégée seems to be highly motivated and well trained. Well Done Chief - see you later!" Bear and Moki exchanged a "guy hug" and Moki moved on to talk to other competitors and fellow SEALs. Bear's friend came up, and introduced himself. Josh was exhausted, but still stood up.

"Son, you showed a lot of heart out there, If you can do that in BUDS, and survive Hell Week, I think you'd make a good SEAL. Bear tells me you're applying for the Special Forces Medical Technician program. We need a bunch of new medics to take care of the new teams Congress had authorized the Navy and Special Forces to form up. Make us proud!"

Since Bear's friend was in civvies, and not wearing any rank insignia, Josh said "I'll do my best Sir" and they shook hands. Once he left, Josh collapsed onto a cot and sipped ice water while Bear closely monitored his condition during the extended cool-down period mandated by the race safety rules. 2 hours later when they released the racers, Bear told Josh that he was taking him out to dinner, but first they had to go back to Visitor Quarters, put up his stuff, and take a shower, because anyone downwind of him would think there was a dead seagull hiding somewhere nearby. Josh laughed, and they piled into the jeep, and drove with the windows open all the way back to Visitor's Quarters.

Chapter 67 - BUDS

Once Josh got inside his room, and got a good whiff of himself, he hurried into the shower, then stuffed his Triathlon suit into a trash bag (the suit was the cause of the dead seagull smell - he'd been swimming in salt water and sweating in it for almost a day). Once he was squared away, he got dressed in civvies for maybe the last time in a long time, and checked outside. Bear and his friend were leaning against the Hummer talking. Josh opened his door, then secured it and walked to the Hummer. Bear teased him "What did you do with the seagull?"

"I threw my triathlon suit in a trash bag and threw it out."

"I can see why you would want to do that, I'm not even sure that a good laundry could get that stench out!"

They climbed into Troy's Humvee. Bear finally introduced his friend as Master Chief Troy Piper, and a SEAL instructor from Coronado. Josh said "Chief Piper, nice to meet you."

"Josh, after tonight, we can have no further contact unless I address you first, or it would be a serious breach of protocol since you're still a tadpole."

"Aye, Aye Chief!"

They drove off the island, to a killer steakhouse that Troy knew about. When they pulled into the parking lot, Josh observed that the restaurant must cater to SEALs. Troy asked Josh why he thought so.

"Every vehicle in the parking lot has a base sticker, and they're either Jeeps, Hummers, or motorcycles. How many SEALs do you know that drive a Volvo sedan?"

Troy looked around. Josh was right, which meant that if he could spot it, so could a terrorist, so he'd have to say something to the base commander about making the base stickers for SEALs less obvious, or eliminating base stickers on SEAL's personal vehicles and replacing them with temporary window placards. When they got inside, Josh was sure the place catered to SEALs. All the waitresses were in their 20's, stunningly beautiful, and wore uniforms with low necklines that accentuated their physical attributes. One of the prettiest waitresses walked over to Troy and gave him a big hug and a kiss, and showed them to their table in the corner. Josh thought "Wow - there are definitely some fringe benefits with this job!" Troy ordered 3 ranch-cut ribeye steaks with all the trimmings, and a pitcher of beer and 3 glasses. Once the waitress left, Josh discretely coughed and whispered to Troy "I'm under age."

"I know, but as Navy Enlisted personnel, the minimum age for drinking on base is 18, so no one hassles anyone here about their age as long as we keep it real."

“Ok Chief.”

15 minutes later 3 huge steaks grilled to perfection with huge baskets of fries, and a pitcher of Coors with 3 glasses were set on the table by the same beautiful waitress. Since Josh was seated across the table from where she set the plates down, when she leaned over to set the plates down, Josh got a better look at her than he planned on. Finally he forced his eyes to her nameplate then her face. “Thanks Kathy” he stammered.

She smiled sweetly said “Anything I can get the 3 of you?”

Josh tried really hard not to blush - what he was thinking could get him in serious trouble!

The 2 SEALs chowed down like they hadn’t eaten in a week, and Josh followed their lead. Later that night, Troy dropped Josh off at the Visitor’s quarters, and told him to report in tomorrow for Pre-BUDS. It was a 2-week period to make sure everyone was physically suited to complete BUDS. BEAR suggested that he wear a spotlessly clean dress uniform and perfectly polished shoes. He had already gotten a haircut the day before, so he was good to go. His package was complete and organized. Bear strongly suggested that he didn’t stick out, and for god’s sake, never be the last person to finish an evolution, that would bring down the wrath of the SEAL Instructors, who could be brutal with Tadpoles. Bear told him to go right to bed; he could guarantee that was the last full night of sleep he’d get for a while.

The next morning, he was up at 0700 for a scheduled check-in of 0800 in deference to the tadpoles that flew in last night. From here on out, the tadpoles’ day started at 0600, and they got to go to bed by 2200 if they hadn’t incurred the wrath of one of the instructors. After initial in-processing, the tadpoles as they were called were told to get into their BDUs, since they were going to start PT in 15 minutes. They had exactly 2 weeks until the next BUDS class would start, so they had to make the most of it. Josh felt ready already, but knew that they would push him harder than ever before. He vowed that he would survive BUDS or be taken out in a stretcher, he wasn’t going to quit - he wasn’t even going to think of that word anymore. The harassment started as soon as they had formed up for calisthenics. The SEAL instructors yelled at them using bullhorns, and instead of just doing jumping jacks, they started right on in with first jumping jacks, pushups, and sit-ups using whistle drills. 1 blast meant assume the position for pushups, 2 meant sit-ups, and 3 meant jumping jacks, and they were to continue to do the exercise until they heard a whistle switching the exercise. Josh thought, “Well, it’s started already, but that just means it would be over sooner.” Meanwhile the other instructors were yelling into their bullhorns that their agony had just begun. After their “Indoctrination phase” as the chief instructor called it, they were to assemble at the pool for their swimming tests. They were double-timed back to the barracks to change into swim gear, then double-timed to the pool, and spent the rest of the afternoon trying not to drown.

The next morning they were up at 0600 for a quick breakfast, then they were introduced to the soft sand around the training area. Josh was glad that he had practiced running in the soft sand,

and stayed towards the head of the pack, but never leading. When they finished that, the instructors decided to introduce this group to “surf torture” early and walked the entire group into the 63 degree Pacific surf, told them to link arms and sit down with their backs to the surf. They were only in for 5 minutes but to some trainees, it felt like forever. When they were called out of the water, the instructors said “better get used to being cold, wet and covered with sand, you’ve got another 6 weeks of this stuff.” Then they ran them up and down the beach some more to “toughen them up.” Later in the afternoon, it was back into the pool. At the end of the 2 weeks, they did a qualifying PST again to drop anyone who couldn’t pass. Josh got nervous because he thought he already had a guaranteed slot, but pushed those fears aside, and said that this was a brand new ball game, and set out to perform his best. This time the instructors insisted on a side or breast stroke for the 500-yard swim. Josh decided to use the breast stroke, because it was marginally faster, and he could qualify easily, and did so with a 10:00 time. Next the pushups and sit-ups, and he equaled his previous marks of 80 each in 2 minutes. The chin-ups seemed easier this time, and he did 20. He was elated to realize he had qualified for BUDS.

Several tadpoles couldn’t hack the obstacle course, and couldn’t finish in the required time. Josh was glad that Bear had made him practice on an older design, so he was able to complete the course in the middle of the pack, and easily qualified. He excelled in the pool since he was a strong swimmer. When they introduced them to the IBS boats, there was an audible groan from the group of trainees, several of them had been rolled back for medical reasons from the last class, and learned to loathe every square inch of the hated rubber boats. The instructors showed them how to get the boats through the surf, and how to land the boats and other boat-handling skills. The instructors told them they were getting off easy. During the winter the surf was much higher, making it much harder to handle the boats. Once they had finished the pre-BUDS, the instructors posted the list of the tadpoles who were invited to BUDS, the rest had to go back to the fleet and try again later. Josh saw his name on the list and said a quick prayer of thanks. The instructors told them not to get too cocky, because tomorrow started the really hard stuff. Josh remembered the sign on the gate coming in “The only easy day was yesterday!” - Someone knew what they were talking about!

The next day, the 100 tadpoles started Phase I of BUDS, and they never stopped running. They double-timed to and from each evolution, and the requirements for each evolution got progressively tougher and tougher. The Instructors were always ready to pounce on any Tadpole that showed any signs of weakness, so Josh quickly learned the safest spot was the middle of the pack. Josh was glad he went through BUDS as an enlisted sailor, because the officers seemed to be getting more than their share of harassment. They ran 4 miles in the sand wearing their heavy boots, and had 2 timed runs per week. Several tadpoles couldn’t keep up and were dropped in the first week as the time allowed to complete each evolution decreased. The 2 mile swim in the ocean with fins was easy for Josh, thanks to Bear insisting on all that swimming in the lake, and his triathlon experience, but again, some of the tadpoles were dropped when they couldn’t meet the time requirements. Several times a day they were led to the surf zone for some more surf torture. Josh realized that if he didn’t think about how cold he

was, it really didn't bother him. He shivered with the rest of them, but it didn't affect his morale or motivation to complete BUDS and earn his Budweiser. He had no problem with the skills tests, including underwater knot tying. He was lucky that most of his boat crew stayed together until Hell Week, and no one dropped. Josh barely made the 50-yard underwater swim, but he did make it. He helped the members of his boat crew with the first aid and knot tying, realizing that if his boat crew stayed together, it meant less work for him. He thought the drown-proofing training was fun. The part he hated was carrying those @#\$@#\$ boats everywhere on top of their heads, since he was one of the taller members of his boat crew. Hell Week was a complete surprise to Josh, who'd lost all track of time in the endless evolutions. All he thought about was getting through the current evolution, and the fact that they couldn't kill him.

Sunday night they were awakened by the sounds of explosives and full-auto fire, and were ordered out of their bunks, and were told to stand at attention. For the next week, they'd be lucky to get 2 hours of sleep per night, and their only respite from the endless grind of cold, wet sandy miserable existence was 4 visits per day to the mess hall, where they ate huge meals to compensate for the lack of sleep. The Instructors were on the remaining tadpoles like a pack of sharks, and harassed them constantly. Josh was cold, wet miserable, and suffered from chafing caused by the sand and surf. He realized the only way he was going to get through all this was to ignore the pain and discomfort. After a while, the surf torture felt good to him. What he didn't realize is the instructors knew that the salt water was keeping their chafed skin from getting any worse. The tadpoles had daily medical checks, and several were pulled out with stress fractures they had hidden from the instructors, because they wanted to complete training and earn their Budweiser. Josh was now sprained, bruised, and chafed, but the medics said that he could continue, and that was all he cared about. By the middle of the week, the survivors were on autopilot, and responded like robots to any command without thinking. The combination of sleep deprivation, cold, and misery were driving the tadpoles to dig deep within themselves to muster the will to continue. Josh almost quit once when he was thrown from the boat when they tried to land on the rocks. He almost drowned, but wasn't injured otherwise, still the incident scared him. He realized he could die out here, and all it would take was a freak accident. The instructor talked to him, assured him that he could remain in the program since he wasn't injured, and was told to get his butt back with his boat crew. Josh's boat crew remained intact until Thursday "So Solly Day" when four of them couldn't take the cold anymore during surf torture and snapped. The instructors combined the remnants of Josh's crew with another crew. Now that he wasn't the tallest tadpole in his boat crew, he was more comfortable carrying the heavy boat. The instructors piled sand into the boat with a shovel, and rode on top to add extra weight. They did a test of their mental acuity by marching the boat crews past several land marks, and telling the crews what they were. Later, when they came back, they had to struggle to remember where they were. By now the medics were using aggressive methods to keep tadpoles in the class, since they were almost through. Several tadpoles were wearing the equivalent of pantyhose to stop the damage to their legs. Several had large parts of their anatomy covered with bandages and splints. The tadpoles resembled the walking wounded, but they wouldn't quit. Finally on Friday morning, the instructors got

together and decided to end Hell Week early, since no one had dropped out since the last big crash, and all they'd do by continuing for a couple of extra hours was to further injure the trainees. When they were told the good news, several trainees broke down and cried. Several were put on stretchers and transported to the base infirmary. The rest were carefully taken to the mess hall for a light meal, helped to shower and change, and put to bed, with instructors and medics supervising in case they fell asleep with an arm or leg out of their racks, or in a position that would cause them further injury. They let them sleep the rest of the day, and when they awoke, they were fed again, and visited by the medics, who bandaged and took care of their aches and pains with large doses of ibuprofen, which had come to be called SEAL candy, since they popped them like candy during training. They gradually recovered and resumed training on Monday.

Chapter 68 - Phase II

Monday dawned bright and early. Josh had healed from his injuries, and most of the Tadpoles were returned to training. They met out on the parade ground for more PT. The instructors kept up the pressure, reducing the maximum qualifying times for each evolution. Josh was one of the best swimmers left and usually finished 1st or 2nd on the 4-mile open ocean swim. He actually liked swimming more than the other evolutions, including long runs in soft sand. One good thing was the instructors stopped the Circus, or Burn-out PT, and other means of deliberately breaking down the tadpoles, and concentrated on turning the tadpoles into SEALs. The only way you'd get dropped now was to fail to complete an evolution, or fail a major test like the dive tank. Josh was looking forward to the diving training. Bear said that was the most fun he had as a SEAL, but the actual ops were tough, since you were swimming for hours in cold murky water with only a swim board with a compass and a clock to guide you. The diving training started easy enough, open circuit diving in the pool. They learned how to don their gear underwater, how to clear their mask, how to put it on right by feel alone. The diving tasks got more and more difficult, culminating with the Combat Training Tank, which allowed the instructors to view the tadpoles, and increased the harassment the Instructors could provide.

One such scenario simulates the effects of being caught in a strong surge when the Diving instructors tumble the tadpoles as if they were in a washing machine, rip their masks and regulators off, and then they have to recover, put their mask and regulator back on without panicking and rocketing to the surface. Several tadpoles panicked, and they were either rolled back or sent back to the fleet. Josh was forewarned about this by Bear, and didn't panic. Once the instructor thoroughly thrashed Josh, he grabbed his mask, felt for the purge valve, put it on right side up, and proceeded to locate his regulator and untangle the hoses, all the while holding his breath near the bottom of the tank. One of the instructors who were watching the tadpoles through a viewing port commented that Josh looked pretty calm in the water. Troy almost said something, and then realized it would only hurt Josh's chances if the other Instructors knew that Bear had been training him for over a year, and he could take whatever they dished out.

Once they completed the "shark attack" scenario, they started spending more and more time in the classroom, starting with the physics of diving. The Draeger LAR V closed circuit breathing apparatus used 100% pure oxygen, a rebreather, and a CO2 scrubber so it didn't leave a trail of bubbles on the surface to make it easier to spot the diver in the water. The problem with the Draeger was it was depth-limited, and if you dove too deep, you could actually get oxygen poisoning. During the classroom phase, they explained the physics and physiology of diving. They practiced what they learned in the pool and in the open ocean. Josh thought underwater navigation was hard, until it clicked in his mind and he got it. If he knew how far he traveled with each kick, and the bearing he traveled on, and how many kicks per minute he maintained, he could navigate with a compass and clock fairly accurately. Josh thought it was too bad GPS didn't work too well under water. The dives got more complex and difficult, but Josh managed to stay ahead of the curve.

Other tadpoles weren't so lucky, and the size of the class continued to shrink. Several failed tests in the hyperbaric chamber, some failed to complete evolutions like the diving bell that taught the SEAL candidate the free ascent technique, which was necessary if their lung failed, or if they had to exit a submarine in an emergency. During this time, the physical standards increased slowly, and there were a few who couldn't keep up, and were rolled over or dropped. Josh had a scare when he failed an evolution. His time on the obstacle course was slightly below standard, and he was called in for a counseling session. The team medic confirmed that the reason he was having problems with the obstacle course was a deep thigh bruise incurred during Hell Week that was still healing. Since the rest of his scores were outstanding, the instructors voted to let him continue the program, but he had just used his 1 free pass. The next failure would result in him being rolled back or dropped. Josh reported to the infirmary where the docs treated his thigh bruise with advanced therapy treatments to speed healing. They excused him from PT for 2 days to let the bruise finish healing, but he still attended all classes and underwater evolutions, since they didn't involve his injury, which resulted from repeated impacts with the top rail of the low fence in the obstacle course. When the bruise healed, he was back to 100%. He breezed through the daytime dives, but the night time dives gave him the willies, but he did them.

Finally he made it through Phase II and on to Phase III - the land warfare phase. The SEALs used the crawl, walk run principle to teach land warfare. Josh breezed through the marksmanship part of the phase, and was so good with the M -16 that he qualified Expert. They spent time in the classroom learning Immediate Action drills, and then went into the field and practiced it. Josh's Militia training came back to him suddenly, and he realized that Bear was teaching SEAL tactics to the militia members, since he started remembering stuff Bear had told him over a year ago. Suddenly it made sense. He liked firing the M -60, but preferred firing the long rifles. He was bummed when they only spent 1 day with the M -14, which was the fully automatic version of the M-1a Springfield Armory rifle. With the open sights, he was shooting groups as small as the instructor was. Finally the head instructor took him aside, and Josh told him he had previous weapons training, and he routinely shot an M -25 at the 600 yard range at Alaska Survival Inc. The instructor had heard about that, and suddenly everything about Josh clicked. He thanked Josh and told him to rejoin training. His old buddy Bear must have had a hand in training this kid. He thought he saw him at Superfrog, but he didn't recognize him. Josh really enjoyed playing with the high explosives. One milestone/hurdle to overcome during Phase III was a 14-mile run and a 5.5 mile swim. They were for completion only, but as usual, superior performance avoided the butt-chewing that the last couple of tadpoles received. Josh made sure that he finished well ahead of the last man, but he wasn't the first man to finish either.

With the start of Week 5, they moved from Coronado to San Clemente Island, where they got to practice everything they learned, and the instructors devised devious "training" exercises. By now, Josh was past caring, and knew that if he wanted to be a SEAL, he had to survive the next couple of months, and then came Graduation. Josh preformed well enough to make it through every evolution, which required more and more from him. He was doing things that 6 months

ago he would have thought were impossible. More and more of the exercises occurred at night, since the SEALs preferred to work at night. They practiced combat beach reconnaissance, charge emplacement which included breath-holding diving to 20 feet. They ran night patrols, ambushes, and direct action raids. Everything except the beach recon techniques was review for Josh, but he learned with a new intensity, since this was the bread and butter of what SEALs were. The final exercise was a Full Mission Profile Field Exercise over a 5 day/night period, which the instructors made as real as possible. They used most of the skills they had learned over the last 6 months. Josh was exhilarated to be finally doing what SEALs did. The instructors were pleased with his performance and leadership abilities. They rotated leaders throughout the exercise to find out who had it, and who didn't. Some men were better at point, and some were better leaders. Once they finished the field-ex, they were transported back to Coronado, and then it was time for Graduation.

They mustered out to the parade ground of the Naval Special Warfare Center, and received their Budweisers. Josh looked up when they were dismissed to see his Mom, Dad and Bear in the stands cheering. They made their way onto the field, and Bear was the first to greet Josh. "Well done Sailor!" Bear swept Josh off his feet in a bear hug, then Ron and Nancy gathered around him. The CO of the NSWC showed up and said "Bear, I thought that was you. I guess it was your training that helped Josh through BUDS."

"Sir, I gave him the knowledge, but it was heart that got Josh through BUDS."

"You should be very proud of Josh, he was one of our outstanding recruits. I understand you wanted to be a Special Forces Corpsman?"

Josh saluted and said "Yes Sir!"

Admiral Johnson returned the salute and said "Once you've completed your probationary period in the teams, I fully expect you to apply for OCS. I read your package, and I'm attaching an endorsement to the rest of your reports recommending you for OCS. Don't let me down!"

"No Sir, I won't let you down!" Josh saluted again, and the admiral returned his salute and left.

Ron stood there amazed. The CO of the NSWC was endorsing Josh's application for OCS, which meant that as soon as he completed A school, and served his probationary period, he'd be pulled out of a team, and transformed from a sailor to an "officer and a gentleman."

2 days later, Bear and Troy took Josh with his brand new Budweiser back to the same restaurant. Kathy was working, and when she saw the "cherry" she practically threw herself at him. He got a very friendly hug, and the lack of female companionship over the last 6 months resulted in an obvious reaction. Kathy smiled and held him tighter, then whispered in his ear, and gave him a big kiss. After dinner, Josh asked if he could be excused. Troy had been a new SEAL once, and knew what was going on. He handed Josh a pack of condoms and told him to

enjoy himself but make sure he was back on base by 0800 tomorrow for muster, he'd square it with the CO. Later that evening Josh was introduced to a new form of SEAL PT. He made it back to the base before 0800, since Kathy dropped him off, and barely had time to change into a fresh uniform and wipe the lipstick off his face before muster. After Breakfast, Troy asked Josh if he had a good time, and if he got it out of his system. He highly suggested not to try that again as long as he was a probationary SEAL, because he could get tossed from the Teams for just about any reason while on probation, including being late for muster.

Chapter 69 - Back Home on the Ranch

Life in Allakaket went on while Josh was away in the Navy. Sarah and Neil got married while Josh was in BUDS and couldn't get away. They felt bad, but Josh wrote and told them to go ahead, he wouldn't be getting much if any leave for the next year. Nancy was feeling older, the only one of their kids left at home was David, who had just turned 17, so she knew he would be home another year. Jake and Diane finally managed to get pregnant, and Diane was almost 6 months pregnant, so Bear decided she could stop jogging. Jake flew for Doc's Lodge all Hunting Season, and every hunter he guided got a nice Caribou. He took to wearing his double shoulder holster full time, and even shot a bear near the cabin. He skinned and brain tanned it, and used it as a throw rug in their new home in front of the fireplace. Once he was done for the season, he helped Diane around the house, since she had lost the ability to see her shoes, and her back was killing her. Between the bear and a Caribou he'd taken at the end of the season, they were set for the winter. Financially they were more than set, and were able to save almost \$50 thousand that year. If he could bank 50 grand per year for the next 20 years, plus the almost \$5 mil he had in the bank, he'd have close to \$10 million in the bank. He didn't need the money, but the number gave him some security. They used the basement of their house as an emergency shelter/pantry, and slowly stocked it full of staples, canned meat, and canned vegetables from their garden.

Diane informed Jake that she was staying home this winter, and doubted she could wear the 5-point seatbelts. She suggested they get a dog, and when a friend of theirs Husky got pregnant, they offered to give them 1 pup from the litter in a couple of months, after they were weaned. The only thing they were sure of was the pups weren't purebred Husky, since their dog had gotten out of her kennel and gotten pregnant by one of the neighborhood dogs. Jake and Diane didn't care, most of the dogs in the neighborhood were even-tempered mutts. With Josh gone to the Navy, Bear's Sniper Team problem was resolved until Diane got pregnant. David was coming along, but wasn't as good of a shot as Josh. David seemed to act like the proverbial "youngest kid" and took forever to grow up. Bear started working on that, and got him working out when he wasn't working for the lodge. He had to pick up the slack at the lodge during hunting season, since Sarah wasn't working there anymore since they were seriously working on starting a family, and the smell of fish guts wasn't conducive to romance. When everyone had time, they went to Bear's shooting range just to stay in practice.

Ralph and Sam concentrated on raising Bert (5) and Larry (4). Sam started homeschooling them using a pre-school/kindergarten curriculum that Nancy had used. They quickly learned simple counting skills and the alphabet. They loved it when Sam read it to them while Oliver lay between them on the bearskin rug. Ralph was flying a couple of days a week for Allakaket Airlines, and seriously considering going into business building Snow Bugs, especially when he got a letter from the State of Alaska asking about the vehicles. The game wardens and park rangers could use a light fast vehicle to patrol in, and the heater would greatly improve officer comfort. The cab would allow them to carry a better radio, and weapons for their protection.

What sold them was when Ralph mentioned the fact that it could pull a fairly heavy sled over the snow as fast as you cared to go, and could easily travel at 40mph with a light load. They were interested in the Kevlar panel protection option, because sometimes they ran into poachers who wouldn't hesitate to shoot at a warden.

Finally the state placed an initial order of 20 units for the price quoted, \$12,000 per copy. Ralph figured he'd clear \$4K per unit, or \$80 grand for the contract. If he had to hire people to build it that would cut into his profit margin, but if he could keep them busy, he'd make his money back in sales volume. Since the vehicle was for off-road use only, he didn't have to mess with the DOT or anyone, and since he was using Chenowith frames that had already been safety tested, all he had to do was build them and warranty them for a year. Ralph contacted his suppliers, and if he ordered 20 units at a time, he'd get much better pricing. If he ordered 50 units, he'd really save money. Ralph spotted a huge unused hangar that was big enough to hold a small assembly line, and called Ron. He wasn't using it for the airline, and made Ralph an offer he couldn't refuse. Instead of charging monthly rent up front, he wanted 10% of Ralph's profits. That way if things went bust, Ralph wouldn't lose money paying rent, and if things got really good, Ron would collect way more than the building would rent for. To Ralph it was a win-win situation, and took him up on the offer. He placed ads in the paper, and soon he had an experienced work crew of out-of-work mechanics and factory workers. He used some of the money Doc gave them to set up his factory with air tools, a rolling assembly line, and office equipment.

Finally the parts started arriving, and they got going assembling the Snow Bugs. They bought a 2-seater dune buggy frame from Chenowith with the 5-point restraint system brackets installed, and ordered the Kevlar panels from the same supplier. He ordered the completed motors and transmissions from VW parts. Since the State of Alaska wanted to run the Snow Bugs on pump gas, Ralph ordered 1600 cc motors set up for 85 octane gasoline instead of Avgas, which saved him \$200 per motor since they installed a stock camshaft, crank and pistons instead of the radical setup. His small group of workers had them built in 2 weeks, and airlifted them to Anchorage for the state to take delivery of them. Once the state took delivery, orders started pouring in from all over the state and Canada, both from State and Federal Government agencies, and individuals. All of a sudden, he had a backlog of 100 orders, and needed to cut costs, so he called all his suppliers, and got quotes for 100-unit pricing. They dropped their prices an additional 30% and Chenowith volunteered to pay shipping to Anchorage for their frames. Since their frames were light but bulky, the additional savings were small, but Ralph took them up on it.

As the orders continued to pour in, Ralph realized that this was becoming a year-round business, and needed to talk to Sam and Ron. Sam was OK with it since the boys were old enough that they weren't a big hassle to take care of, and Ron was happy as a clam. With Jake flying year-round for Allakaket Airlines except for hunting season, he didn't need Ralph to fly for them. He said he'd keep him on the books, and available as Emergency Relief only, and keep the same deal they had for the \$1 lease of the SuperGoose. Ralph asked Ron to work up a

quote for shipping Snow Bugs to and from Anchorage using the Super Stallion or the Chinook. Since the vehicles were light, if they were packed correctly into an 8-unit or 10-unit crate, the Super Stallion would be their best bet. Ralph set about designing a 10-unit shipping crate since the Super Stallion could carry 36,000 pounds, and each fully assembled Snow Bug only weighed maybe 2,000 pounds. He built a rack to stack the SB's on top of each other with drive-up ramps. He'd load them from opposite sides, so the engines would counterbalance each other. He built another shipping crate to fly 20 frames at once to Allakaket from Anchorage. Ron reminded Ralph that he needed product liability insurance, and he told Ron that he'd already taken care of that when he filed his incorporation papers with the state. The name Snow Bugs Inc. was available, and the trademark Snow Bug didn't infringe on an existing trademark, so he was all set.

Ralph offered 2 models of the Snow Bug, a 2-seater or a 4-seater. The 2-seater sold for \$11,899.00 each, and the 4-seaters sold for \$13,995.00 each FOB Anchorage or Fairbanks. Allakaket Airlines could ship units to other areas in Alaska on a space available basis for an additional charge. Ralph talked to Ron, who thought that was an excellent idea, because sometimes their planes flew with empty cargo areas to Anchorage or Fairbanks. 6 months after he started selling them, a snowmobile dealer with stores in Anchorage and Fairbanks asked him if he could become a dealership for his product. Ralph called Ron and BA, and the 4 of them met in Anchorage to negotiate the deal. BA and Ron did most of the talking, since they were shrewd negotiators, and this guy had a reputation of being a barracuda in negotiations. Finally they agreed on a fixed-price contract based on units ordered. The dealer asked for flooring, which they refused, since he could get favorable terms from a bank for a commercial loan, and get the bank to take the risk. Next he asked for free shipping, which the also refused, since they were giving him a good price per unit. Finally the three of them met separately before they signed the contract.

"Ralph, this guy's a snake, but a predictable snake. I've reviewed the contract, and it's as airtight as we can make it. 2 words of warning: Never accept anything from the dealership without his signature on it, and never extend him credit. He loves to slow-pay all his accounts, and makes most of his money by paying late, and demanding favorable credit terms."

"BA, if he's such a snake, why do I want to do business with him?"

"Because he's got the largest customer base in Alaska for snowmobiles. He can easily sell 100 units per month."

"OK, if you say so. Just make sure he understands that unless he personally signs an order, it won't get filled, and the contract terms are not negotiable and are fixed, so he better not even think about asking for credit. Matter of fact, I want to be paid for all units he orders before they are physically shipped to him."

"I can take care of that Ralph. I agree, I wouldn't trust him as far as we could throw him

either.”

BA walked back into the meeting room “Ok, 2 last things. This is a paid-in advance contract. The balance for each shipment must be paid in full, and transferred to our account by 5:00pm the business day before the order ships. Failure to pay for the order by 5:00 the business day before the scheduled shipping date will result in a \$500 shipment delay penalty. Furthermore, all orders must be signed by you with a personal liability clause in case you renege on an order, or cause us any other losses.”

Sam Snidegrass growled “What the hell - you think I’m some sort of crook?”

BA didn’t back down. “Mr. Snidegrass, your reputation precedes you. If you didn’t have the corner on the snowmobile market in Alaska, we wouldn’t even be doing business with you. This is a take-it or leave it agreement. We’re more than willing to walk away from this, since we don’t need you to sell for us, since we’ve got more than enough orders coming in to keep us busy. Remember, you contacted us.”

Sam was not a happy camper. BA was an excellent and very tough negotiator, and his reputation was well-known too. He wasn’t some babe in the woods. Sam was hoping to fleece Ralph and get the lion’s share of the profits, and then BA had to show up. Damn - still, he was greedy enough to want what money he could make out of the deal, and he’d just have to find another way to fix things later. The lawyers modified the contract according to BA’s stipulations, then they each read it and signed it. BA said they could start delivering 10 units per week 2 weeks after the first order was placed. He had a copy of the price list, which was fixed and non-negotiable. They shook hands all around, and flew home. On the flight home, Ralph asked Ron “Why do I feel I just made a deal with the Devil himself?”

“Ralph, like BA said, Sam’s a snake, but a predictable snake. He didn’t expect BA to show up and negotiate for you. He was probably planning on taking you for everything you had while he made all the money. BA is a shrewd negotiator and knows how to write an air-tight contract, so you should be OK. This guy will probably sell 100 units per month on a good month, and even during the slow months he’ll still move 20-30 units per month. That’s better than you could have done on your own. Besides, you don’t have to give him your government contracts. He’s not an exclusive dealer, you’re giving him favorable pricing for the units he buys from you, but you can continue to sell units over the internet, and via government contracts.”

“That’s good to know, because if he was an exclusive dealer, he could put me out of business by refusing to buy any units for a month or two.”

They flew back to Allakaket, and when they landed, Ralph had an order for 20 4-seater Snow Bugs sitting on his desk, signed by Sam Snidegrass, with a note that the balance in full had been wire-transferred to his account. Ralph called Bill, and was amazed that a deposit in the amount of \$237,915.00 from Snidegrass Motors was in his corporate account. Ron and BA were

pleased, but warned Ralph not to change anything just because he paid so far in advance this time. Ralph called the factory foreman and said they needed 20 4-seater Snow Bugs for Snidegrass Motors for delivery in 2 weeks. He assured Ralph that they'd be done on time, since they had sufficient stock on hand to build 30 4-seaters, and parts for another 50 were en-route. The factory got busy, and 2 weeks later, all 20 4-seater Snow Bugs shipped to Snidegrass's dealership. Parts kept coming in, but so did orders. Everyone was busy including Ralph, who thought he would have been less busy if he would have stayed at Anchorage Regional. On the up side, he was making a lot of money. Snidegrass placed another order for 20 Snow Bugs, except this time they were the 2-seaters. Ralph received a deposit in his bank the next day for \$202,283.00. 2 weeks later, Ralph shipped them to Anchorage. The week after that, Ralph received another order for 20 4-seater Snow Bugs, to be delivered to Snidegrass's dealership in Fairbanks. The next day another deposit for \$237,915.00 appeared in his corporate account. Maybe Sam Snidegrass wasn't a snake after all. Ralph was happy, the Snow Bugs were rolling out, and the parts were rolling in. The Super Stallion crews were happy; they were busy and home every night. Snow Bug Inc. made almost \$68 thousand dollars on just those three orders, and after expenses, Ralph showed an \$8,000 profit, so he cut a check to Ron for \$800, and put the remainder in the bank. When he wasn't building Snow Bugs for Snidegrass, Ralph was building them for customers who ordered them over the internet, or small government contracts from Canada and the upper US.

As Diane's pregnancy advanced Jake was doing more and more for her. He was glad that it wasn't during the peak of the Hunting Season, so he would be home when his son was born. They had already picked a name for him; they would call him Daniel, or Dan for short. As her due date got closer, Diane made an appointment with Doc Miller, who was about ready to retire, and talked to the village midwife, who would do the delivery at home, since Doc Miller said that Daniel was coming along fine, with no apparent complications. Just to be on the safe side, Jake had Ralph's cell number on speed dial on his cell phone, since as an ER Doc, Ralph was the best trained doctor in the area to deal with any complications or emergencies during delivery. Sarah told her mom that she was pregnant too, and Nancy realized that she soon would be a Grandmother big time. She thought she was too young, her grandmother was old! Then she remembered that she and Ron started young, and if she added 20 years to how old she was when she had Sarah, the number were just right. Before Diane had Daniel, their friend's Husky had puppies, and 2 weeks later, Jake drove over to pick one out, since Diane said she wasn't moving if she didn't have to. He picked out a beautiful puppy with a star-shaped marking around his eye, so Jake called him Star. Diane thought he was cute, but told Jake that the puppy was his responsibility. Just for laughs, Jake called up his mom "Mom, remember when you asked if you were going to get grandkids or grand-puppies first, well - it looks like you got a grand-puppy first, I just picked up a new puppy, and I called him Star. If you want to see him, you'll have to come here, because Diane's not moving off the couch unless she has to! Ok, see you in a few!"

One hour later, Nancy showed up at Jake and Diane's home. Star was asleep on Diane's lap, so Nancy got to visit with both of them, and commiserate with Diane, who felt as big as a house,

and was making jokes that they should sell advertising on her maternity clothes. Star woke up, and Nancy held him for a minute, then quickly picked him up and set him back down on the floor. Seems Star decided that it was time to go to the bathroom. Jake got a paper towel and cleaned up the floor, then apologized to his mom. “Don’t worry about me; it’s not the first time I’ve been peed on. If I remember correctly you liked to pull a “fountain of youth” right after we took you out of the bath. You almost peed all over your dad, who managed to turn you around in the nick of time and hold you over the toilet.”

“Gee mom- thanks for that reminder!”

Diane started to laugh even though her belly hurt when she laughed. Jake thought his wife was beautiful.

Fall progressed into winter, and as Josh completed BUDS, Ralph’s business was going gang-busters, and both Diane and Sarah’s pregnancies took their normal course. Jake stayed close to home, and one day Diane let out a yell and Jake was in there with her in an instant. “I think my water broke!” and then the first contraction hit her. Jake stripped the bed, laid down a tarp and a sheet, and tucked them into the mattress, then called the midwife. She arrived half an hour later, and said that Diane was in the early stages of labor, and this could take a while. Jake was acting as her Lamaze coach, and sat next to her. He made sure he didn’t say something stupid like “I want to share the experience” because he knew she’d grab him and squeeze. 6 hours later, Daniel was born, and once the labor was over Jake was glad that Diane didn’t turn into something from Psycho or the Exorcist as some of his friends who had children had alluded to. Daniel was laid on his mother’s abdomen until the placenta was delivered, which the midwife bagged up, and Jake got to cut the cord. Finally he laid Daniel on his mother’s breast, and soon he was nursing. The midwife pulled a sheet and a light blanket up over them, and told Jake to check on them every hour or so.

Two months later, Sarah had a daughter, and they named her Rachael. She looked just like her mother according to her proud papa Neil. 6 months later, Doc Miller announced his retirement. Ralph asked Sam, and when she said OK, he petitioned the State of Alaska to allow him to take Doc Miller’s place. The Director of Rural Medical Services flew to Allakaket, and asked if Sam were available too for emergency surgery. She said she was out of practice, but the Director suggested that if she were on call, they could upgrade the Clinic in Allakaket to offer Emergency Services. Since Ralph lived just a couple of miles from the existing clinic, and they had cellular service, the Emergency number for the clinic would forward to his cell phone, and the State would pay them a monthly stipend. Even with Ralph being an ER doc instead of a GP, they felt he was more than qualified, and the truth was they didn’t have any applicants, and there wasn’t some poor schmuck from New York City that needed to work off his student loans.

Sam wondered about his business, and Ralph said the foreman was just about ready to move into Management, and he was tired of the day-to-day BS of running his own business. He was

available for decisions, since he was only a phone call away. The director said they were paying Doc Miller \$40K per year, and they would be willing to pay them \$60K if Sam agreed to be on call for emergency surgery. The State had a quarter million budgeted to upgrade the clinic, so Ralph said that he'd love to take the job. The next day they left the boys with Anne, and drove to the old clinic. Ralph and Sam made a list of all the stuff they wanted and e-mailed it to the Director of Rural Medical Services, and fainted when it was approved. They'd ordered over \$500 thousand worth of stuff, but in the process, upgraded the clinic from a GP/Wellness clinic to an Emergency Services clinic with modern equipment, computers, and more space. They built a bigger building next to the old clinic, then converted the old clinic to a Wellness center with a Social Services Nurse who would do BP and health screenings. The new building had enough room for 6 treatment rooms and an OR in case they needed it. It was well stocked for a rural ER, and Ralph felt like he was at home. The Wellness Nurse could refer any cases she thought should be seen by a doc to the new Rural ER. Slowly business picked up as the people started realizing they had a well-trained doc available, and they didn't have to go to Anchorage for everything. Ralph still referred certain cases to Anchorage to see a specialist. Ralph felt like he was back in Louisiana, except no one spoke Cajun except Sam. He liked wearing greens again, and the badge that said "Doctor Lacombe." His schedule was very relaxed, and unless he had a bona-fide emergency, he was home for dinner every night at 5:00

Chapter 70 - Back in Training

Once Josh had finished his BUDS, he was sent to his A School. Since he wanted to be a Special Forces Medical Technician, he first had to complete Hospital Corpsman School, then get advanced training beyond what the normal corpsman had, since he might be the only medical care for an entire village of partisans they were assisting. With his paramedic training, Josh breezed through the Hospital Corpsman's school, since he knew 99% of what they were teaching him. Again, he spent most of his time helping the other trainees. The instructors were amazed until Josh explained he was a licensed Paramedic in Alaska, and had to know this stuff cold because hunters got shot more frequently than they could imagine. He told them he was trained by an ER Doc and an ER Surgeon, who just happened to be Husband and Wife. One of the instructors sat him down and basically gave him an oral exam on all the stuff he needed to know to graduate, and Josh wasn't kidding, he knew it cold. The instructors had the option of graduating him early and letting him get back to his unit, or keeping him there. Since he still had other schools to attend, like Jump School at Fort Benning, GA, they decided to graduate him and let him finish his schools. Once they signed the paperwork, he received orders to Fort Benning to catch up with his class and finish his SEAL training. Josh was looking forward to Jump School, and while he was waiting for the next class to start, he located a Special Forces Medical Instructor that was stationed at Benning, and spent 2 weeks studying the advanced techniques he'd need later. Since it wasn't a formal class, he didn't get certified for the class, but it would make the real class much easier later.

When the next class at Jump School started Josh was apprehensive but looking forward to it. Since he had passed BUDS and now had an official rating (Hospital Corpsman), he received a notice from the Navy informing him of his promotion to E-2 effective his enlistment date, and his promotion to E-3 effective receipt of this letter. He went to the commissary and bought the required stripes to reflect his new rank and had them sewn onto his uniforms, then made sure his rate badges were properly attached to his BDU shirts every morning. He added his Corpsman badge next to his Budweiser. Jump school was a breeze compared to BUDS, and he was looking forward to his first static jump. He was the first man in his string, and when the green light came on, the Jump master held him at the door for a fraction of a second to make sure everything was safe, then yelled "GO!" and Josh stepped out into space. When he reached the end of the static cord, it jerked his parachute open just like he was on a bungee cord, then the parachute banged open. He had maybe 30 seconds of hang time before he hit the ground, and made sure he was in the proper position to execute a Parachute Landing Fall. His feet were together, and his knees bent as he touched the ground, next he rolled onto his side, then reached up and dumped his parachute, then bundled it up and marched back to the jump shack. The Sergeant said "Well done trainee. 4 more jumps, and you'll get your badge."

Josh sort of wished they taught freefall techniques at Benning, but the Army was married to Static Jumps which could get a lot of paratroopers on the ground together quickly. Ron told him about flying at the Freefall simulator at Tampa, FL and he wanted to try it. Josh's scariest

jump was the required Night Jump. Again, he was the first man in his stick, and this time, he looked out the door and couldn't see shit! It was pitch dark out, and the landing zone was so far below that he couldn't see the markers from the door of the airplane. The Jumpmaster gave the Command "UP" and they all stood up. Josh checked the guy behind him, then turned around to check the guy in front, and realized he was the first man in his stick again. The jumpmaster commanded "Hook up" and he reached up and connected his static line to the cable running down the aircraft, then finally he ordered "In the Door" and the line moved forward 2 paces, and Josh stood in the door. Finally he could see something, a dull glow below him that indicated where the drop zone was. 2 seconds later the green light came on, and the Jumpmaster yelled "GO...Go..Go!" and slapped Josh on the back, but he barely felt it. He stepped into the void and fell for a second until he reached the end of his static cord, which pulled his chute open. He was glad his chute opened, and he was right over the drop zone. As he got closer to the ground, he got into his PLF position, and as his boots touched the ground, he rolled right onto his left side, just like he had been trained, then spilled his chute and bundled it. He had made it - this was his 5th jump, and tomorrow he'd get his ice cream cone, as they called the parachutist's badge. He realized this was Basic Training for a SEAL, and later he'd learn how to HAHO and HALO with 100% of his body weight strapped to him. He read books by Dick Marcinko and wondered why anyone would pull right about the masthead of a destroyer after he had made his required 5 jumps. He could pull low with the best of them, but 500 feet was plenty low for him.

The next morning, they had a basic Graduation ceremony with the Sergeant pinning the snow cone on the uniforms of the trainees. When the Sergeant came up to Ron, he saw the Budweiser and the caduceus and said "Well done SEAL, bring them home alive."

"Will do Sergeant!"

Once he was finished with Jump School, Josh returned to his Training Command at Coronado to await the opening of his next school, and assignment to a SEAL Team. While he waited, Troy decided that since Josh had nothing to do, he'd give him some personal instruction on how the SEALs used the Draeger, and took him out into San Diego Bay where they practiced attaching dummy Limpet mines to Navy ships in the harbor. Josh was amazed it was so easy, and Troy said that the Navy's idea of security when they were in port was to keep people from walking aboard the ship, and there was almost no protection against a diver wearing a Draeger unit. Half an hour later when they reached their IBS, Josh looked back to see what would happen when their dummy limpets went off and pumped a bunch of yellow dye around the ships they had targeted. Try as they might, the only way to secure a ship against divers with Draegers was to have divers in the water looking for them. He would have loved to hear the Ship's Captain cursing the SEALs!

Finally Josh got word he had been assigned to a West Coast SEAL team that needed a Corpsman. Instead of forming new teams around the trainees, the SEALs had decided long ago to bring trainees into existing teams so they could find out what being a SEAL was really about,

and learn the trade from pros. He spent the next year or two going to different schools, and when he wasn't in school, he was training with his new SEAL team, including several Full Mission Profile training exercises. Josh never repeated his escapade at the Restaurant, and felt bad for it. He thought he was going to wait until he got married, then realized that might be a while, so he didn't feel so bad, but never went back. His team was mostly older SEALs, and married, which cut down on the carousing, but he didn't miss it. They were quiet professionals with a very dangerous job. Josh finished his year's probation, and was accepted as a full member of the team. Several times during Full Mission Profile exercises, he got to practice his skills for real when a SEAL hurt himself with a bad landing, or got grazed by shrapnel from an exploding practice grenade. His boss told Josh that the closer they could come to combat in training, the less SEALs he'd lose if they had to go to war for real.

Josh's wish came true when his CO approved him carrying his personal P-14, since most of the SEALs had dumped their 9mm Berretta in favor of a high-cap .45 or a 1911. His main weapon was a Mini-UZI manufactured by IMI as a special order for the US Special Forces as a .45acp weapon with a QD suppressor. It carried 30 rounds of .45acp, and with a rate of fire of 950 rounds per minute, it took a while for Josh to learn to fire short controlled bursts of 3-5 rounds. The SF version of the UZI was Full-Auto only, fired from an open bolt, and was built to higher specs than the export version of the UZI with a fully chromed barrel and chamber so it wouldn't jam easily. Josh's was fitted with a custom shoulder holster under his right arm, with a break-front barrel retainer, and a fixed sling. He carried 4 loaded mags on the offside of the carrier to balance the rig. Since he was loaded down with medical gear, and his first job was caring for and securing a wounded SEAL, they didn't want him carrying a large part of the team's firepower. The Mini-Uzi had an effective range of 100 yards, which was fine with Josh. His suppressor was able to go quickly from his P-14 to his Uzi since they took the same mount. Josh couldn't wait to get home and challenge his Dad and Ralph to a pistol shooting contest, because SEALs put thousands of rounds downrange each week during training, and he was sure he was faster than his dad now. He doubted he could shoot rifle as well as he could, but that wasn't his job. The SEALs had trained Snipers, but they were defensive instead of offensive snipers who were situated in overwatch positions to observe and report, and if necessary take out a threat to the team. Most of the SEAL Snipers used a variation of the M-1a, since they'd almost never shoot something more than 600 yards away, and the 20 round mag and the semiauto action gave them extra firepower if needed.

When he requested the Mini-Uzi in .45acp as his main weapon, his CO asked him if he'd rather have an MP-5/10SD since they had tons of them in stock instead of the older UZI. Josh said that if they could get one of the .45acp Uzis out of storage, it would take the same ammo as his P-14, so he would only have to carry .45acp ammo in his combat bag instead of .45 and 10mm. His boss knew Josh had a point, so he said "Ok Doc, if they can locate one with at least 10 mags, it's yours." Little did he know that Josh had already checked with a friend of Bear's at MacDill who was sitting on a bunch of them with 30-round magazines and had modern Shadow Technology suppressors for them too - Seems Delta ordered a bunch before they switched to the MP-5/10SD for the bigger more powerful round, and they had a dozen still in the IMI

wrappings. He got his CO to sign for the requisition, and 1 week later, he was the proud owner of a very rare Mini Uzi. IMI didn't sell many more .45acp Mini-Uzi's to the US Gov't since the advent of the MP-5/10SD. 2 things Doc liked better about the UZI. It was lighter and smaller than the MP-5/10SD, especially when you removed the suppressor, which you couldn't do with the H&K. He thought of the .45 acp Ingram Mac-10, but it was more of a bullet hose like the Sten gun and wasn't very accurate, and pretty useless outside of 25 yards regardless of what the producers of Invasion USA would lead you to believe. Josh quickly got the hang of firing short controlled bursts with the full-auto trigger, and when he mounted the suppressor, the loudest noise you heard was the bolt hitting the firing pin. If he really needed to be quiet, he could mount the same suppressor to his P-14, since the SEALs bought barrels from Para-Ordinance so they could mount QD suppressors on their pistols. Instead of a barrel bushing, a threaded adapter was factory installed on a slightly longer barrel with QD ears that matched the QD ears of the Shadow Suppressor.

Finally, after almost 2 years in the Navy, Josh's request for 2 weeks of leave was approved, as well as his transport orders via MAC to Elmendorf AFB in Alaska. He called his dad, and told him he'd be home in a couple of days, and he'd better practice up, and tell Ralph to practice too! He called again from Seattle when he had a confirmed flight to Elmendorf, and Ron said that he would meet him with the SuperGoose at Elmendorf. The next day, Ron was looking for his Son, and was surprised to see a big rangy man standing in front of him saying "Hi Dad!" Josh's hair was cut short, but not quite regulation short, and he weighed almost 200 pounds of solid muscle. His upper body looked like Arnold Swartzenegger's after a work out. All he had with him was a military duffle, which they loaded into the SuperGoose. Josh climbed into the co-pilot's seat, and Ron requested take-off clearance. Once they were back on their way to Allakaket, Ron blurted out "Josh, I barely recognize you - you have really changed and grown up." Since he had just left a military installation, he was still in his dress whites, and Ron checked, and Josh's chest was full of medals and badges.

When they landed, Josh was surprised to see Bear, Gene, and Steve there to greet him as well as his family. Bear was the first one to him, and tried to pick him up and give him a bear hug, and failed, Josh was solid as a rock, and in better shape than Bear remembered being in. Even though they weren't in uniform, Josh saluted Gene and Steve, and they smartly returned it. Nancy ran up to her son and gave him a big hug with tears in her eyes saying "I'm so proud of you, and I've really missed you!" Jake looked at his younger brother with newfound admiration while Gene, Bear and Steve checked out the medals on his chest. For a newly promoted E-4, he sure had a lot of stuff on his chest. Bear knew that a lot of Josh's awards were classified, and he couldn't wear them, but what he was wearing impressed the heck out of him. It looked like Josh had been busy for the last couple of years. He told Bear that he had been accepted to OCS, and that was why they approved 2 weeks of leave, because once he started OCS, he'd be busy for a couple of years. Normally the Navy reassigned Mustang officers to a new unit when they came through OCS, but the SEALs were hurting for experienced Medical Technicians, so Josh would stay with his old unit, especially when Josh expressed no interest in Flag rank or driving ships. All he wanted to be was a SEAL, and if the Navy wouldn't let him stay with his team,

he'd turn down OCS. Diane introduced Josh to his new nephew Daniel Williams, and Sarah introduced him to his niece Rachael and his other nephew, Russell Lewis. Josh held his niece and nephews, then gave their moms a hug, and said he was ready to go home. They drove to Ron and Nancy's, and when they drove up into the driveway, Josh noticed that Starsky and Hutch didn't run out to greet him. "Dad, where's Starsky and Hutch?"

"They died a couple of years ago, right after you left. You were in BUDS, so we didn't want to disturb you with the news. We buried them out back if you want to say hi to them."

Josh set his sea bag down and walked out back by himself, and found Starsky and Hutch's graves. They were buried next to each other, and he thought that was fitting, since they were inseparable in life. He knelt next to their graves and wept. He was closer to those 2 dogs than he had told anyone, and it broke his heart to realize he'd never see them again. Suddenly he felt a familiar hand on his shoulder, and looking up through his tear-stained eyes, he saw the face of his older brother Jake. "I know Josh, I cried too when they died. I made sure they were buried with their favorite toy. I'm sure they're waiting for us at the Rainbow Bridge." Jake handed Josh a copy of the poem and turned to leave and let his brother mourn in private. Later, Josh wiped his eyes and got up, then went back into the house. The only people there were his family. He felt suddenly like he was home, yet he wasn't. This was once his home, and this was his family. Now the Navy was his home, and the SEALs his family. Still, he loved and missed them, and they spent the rest of the day getting caught up.

The next morning Josh asked his dad if he'd been practicing. Ron grinned thinking "Junior's feeling cocky and wants to take on Dad - Ok!" Josh took his P-14 out of his sea bag with the IWB holster and 5 single-mag carriers, and said "Excuse me" and walked into the bathroom. 2 minutes later, you would have never known he was carrying a large pistol and 5 loaded mags. Word had spread of the grudge match, and the entire town tried to squeeze into the shooting range. The rangemaster ordered half of them to watch through the glass, because it was too crowded. When they were all set, Ron asked Josh, "OK, what do you want to try."

"How about a pure speed run with 3 magazine changes. All rounds in the 10-ring or better, at 20 yards."

"Deal!"

Josh won the coin toss, and went first. The rangemaster ran a B-27 down to the 20 yard line, and everyone put on their Wolf ears and shooting glasses. When everyone was set, Josh shrugged his shoulders twice, the rangemaster picked up the timer and moved to his left. Finally Josh raised his hands into the surrender position, and the rangemaster touched the button on the timer. As soon as the beeper went off, Josh was a blur of motion, drew and fired in one smooth motion, and emptied the pistol into the 10-ring like he was firing the Uzi. He moved his thumb slightly, dropped the empty mag, grabbed his first spare, shoved it home, thumbed the slide release and continued shooting, barely losing a second with the combat reload. The gun

roared continuously, and locked open again. Josh reached for his second reload, and slammed it home, then swept the slide release down and resumed firing. Seconds later, the second magazine was empty, and he reloaded a 3rd time. Seconds later, the 4th magazine was empty, and Ron was standing there open-mouthed. When they checked his time, Ron shook his head. Josh had shot 57 rounds into the 10-ring or better in 41 seconds flat. There was no way he could do that, his best time for 57 rounds was 45 seconds, and that was at 15 yards. Years ago, when he was shooting with Ralph, he fired 43 rounds at 15 yards in a little over 31 seconds, but that was almost 10 years ago!

Ron walked over and hugged Josh then said “There’s no way I could even get close to that time - you win!”

Josh said the smartest thing of his life when he said “I’m not going to try and challenge you to shooting rifles!” Ralph was watching too, and was standing there amazed. He fired the P-14 so fast that he couldn’t hear the individual explosions of the rounds firing. Later Bear walked over to check his pistol and make sure it wasn’t full auto. “Son, nobody shoots that fast!”

“I’ve been shooting 1,000 rounds per week for the last 6 months rain or shine. My main weapon is a 45-caliber mini-Uzi that’s full auto.”

“Nice gun, how’d you get one?”

“A friend of yours from MacDill knew Delta was sitting on a bunch of them they never opened when they switched to the MP-5/10SD.”

“So why didn’t you get one too!”

“This way my pistol and subgun use the same ammo, so all I have to carry in my combat pack is 500 rounds of .45 acp ammo, instead of carrying .45 and 10mm ammo.”

“Smart Kid. Troy told me you were accepted for OCS.”

“That’s how I got the 2 weeks of leave, they figured I’d be busy for a while.”

“They were right, so are they letting you go back to the Teams?”

“They’re letting me go back to my original unit!”

“Isn’t that against normal procedures?”

“Bear, they’re hurting for trained Special Forces Medical Technicians so bad that they’re not even going to send me out to the fleet. I told my CO that if I couldn’t stay with the SEALs, they could forget OCS, and he made arrangements for me to return to my unit.”

“Must be nice to be indispensable!”

“That’s not what my CO said, we’re all dispensable if we have to die to complete the mission, we die! I’m not looking forward to it, but if my number comes up, I hope it does when I’m in action.”

“Let me guess, your teammates call you Doc - right!”

“No kidding Bear, they always call their corpsman Doc!”

Chapter 71 - Organized Chicken Shit

Josh spent the remainder of his leave visiting family and friends, and they went shooting at Bear's range. Jake and Ron were in for a surprise when Josh took out his old M -25 and shot a 2.5" group at 600 yards. The best he'd ever been able to do before was 4 inches at 600 yards. Ron walked over to him and said "I can see that someone's been practicing."

"When my CO found out about my rifle qualification scores, he asked me to cross-train as the team sniper in case he's wounded or busy elsewhere. When I'm not shooting my Pistol or Uzi, I'm shooting the team's sniper rifles. One of them is a National Match M-1a. They put the Springfield Armory scope on it for me, so it's pretty close to the M - 25 minus the adjustable stock. I've actually shot a 2" 5-shot group at 600 yards before. Since I can shoot .308 all day with the Teams, what I'd really like to do is shoot one of the M-200's on the 1,000 yard line just for kicks. The SEALs might be getting some soon."

That's all his Dad needed to hear, and he uncased an M -200, and had Bear mount and boresight the Swarovski scope. Next they took it to the 600-yard line to set the zero and confirm the boresight. Once Josh got the rifle zeroed at 600 yards, he opened a new logbook, recorded the date, the rifle's serial number, and the atmospheric conditions just like Ron did. Next they moved to the 1,000 yard line. Ron suggested adding 3 inches to his 600-yard zero, so Josh added 1 click to his 600-yard zero, then Ron helped him get set and adjust the rifle. Josh seemed to know what he was doing, so Ron let him alone, but suggested setting the bipod and monopod so that the x-ring was centered in the reticle of the scope. Josh got the scope set up, and fired 10 dry-fires, calling his break. Finally he loaded the gun, put on his hearing protectors, and checked that the range was clear. Josh got behind the gun, cycled the action, cleared the safety, and looked through the scope. He was amazed that the image in the scope wiggled less than his M - 25 at 600 yards, then he remembered that with the bipod/monopod setup, it was almost like shooting off sandbags on a benchrest. He took a firing grip on the gun, and when he touched it, he noticed it vibrated more, so he went into his calming routine Ron had taught him. When he opened his eyes, the crosshairs were oscillating right around the X-ring in a figure 8 pattern. He touched the trigger as the crosshairs were oscillating into the x-ring, and Ron was pleasantly surprised that his first round was a bullseye. Josh settled down and fired 4 more times. When the gun locked open, Josh was surprised to learn that all 5 rounds were in the x-ring, and he had just shot a 5-inch group at 1,000 yards. Ron hugged his son and said "I knew it - all you needed was a bunch of practice, and you just shot a half-moa group at 1,000 yards. If the SEALs decide to get the M -200, you could probably shoot it as well or better than their designated Sniper."

"I'd like that Dad, but I don't have time to go to Sniper School with OCS coming up. My CO said that once I come back from OCS, he wanted to make me the team leader's assistant, since we'd be the only 2 commissioned officers on the team. The rest of the guys are E-4 enlisted up to E-7 non-coms."

When they returned to Allakaket, Josh met the rest of his friends, but basically felt that he was a stranger in a strange land, and the only people who understood him were Bear, Gene, and Steve. He wasn't too terribly choked up when his 2 weeks were up. Bear talked with him and told him what they called OCS and that if he behaved himself and treated it like Basic, it would be much easier than BUDS or most of the schools he went to. Instead of flying back to San Diego, he had orders to report to NAS Pensacola in Florida to start OCS. He wore civilian clothes per his orders, and packed all of his uniforms and medals. It took almost 2 days to fly MAC from Elmendorf to Pensacola with transfers and everything. He made it on time, and had a taxi drop him at the main base gate so that they could process him in.

OCS was a 12-week school, but between in-processing and out-processing, he knew it would take around 13 weeks to get back to Coronado and his team, assuming they were still in San Diego when he got back instead of overseas somewhere. Since he was a SEAL, and was supposed to be armed 24/7, when he got to the main gate, he surrendered his weapon, magazines and holsters to the Master Chief of the Guard, who filled out a receipt for the equipment, and stowed it in the weapons locker. The procedure was so well rehearsed that Josh knew that they had processed hundreds of SEAL Mustangs through OCS before, since they were one of the few sailors that was supposed to be armed 24/7 due to the nature of their duties. When he was finished, the Chief told him there was a Hummer and a driver who would drive him to Building 622, the OTCP Quarterdeck, where he would be processed into OCS. There was a big sign inside the Quarterdeck that said OCS Check-in. Josh stood in line, and when he got to the front, they asked for his package. Inside his package was his complete military records, a copy of his EPSQ on floppy disk, his orders, and 5 copies; a certified copy of his birth certificate (which was a bear to get since he was born at home instead of a hospital.) They asked him if he had at least \$100 cash on him, and he chuckled. Knowing how efficient Military payroll was, he had 5,000 dollars in traveler's checks and \$200 in cash in a money belt. They asked if he had everything on the list, and he told them that he had his entire kit and several changes of BDUs, and 2 pair of running shoes in his sea bag. The admin clerk assigned Josh a room number, and gave him directions to his barracks. The told him to go next door and get his issue for OCS.

Next door was a supply clerk who issued PT uniforms and BDUs to Officer Candidates, as they were called. He must have seen SEALs before, so he wasn't surprised when Josh asked for 2XL shirts and medium pants and shorts. Since Josh already had a good set of running shoes in his kit, he was set. He walked outside, located his barracks and his bunk, then quickly got his area squared away and cleaned. Bear had told him to keep his area always ready for inspection, and unless he was in PT, to be squared away at all times. Later that day, he met his Officer Candidate Instructor, who would be in charge of his class, which would be known from here on out by their in-processing date. He liked having SEALs in OCS, since they could easily pass all the requirements, and could be counted on to help some of the slower candidates pass OCS.

When the rest of the class got checked in, the OCI introduced himself as Lieutenant Commander Lewis, then suggested they get in their PT uniforms, he was going to see what kind of shape they were in. Luckily their CO's or Chiefs had tipped them off, and there weren't too many

butterballs. LCDR Lewis was pleased that Josh wasn't out front showing off, but in the middle of the pack, encouraging several Officer Candidates to give their all. Several days later, when their first Physical Fitness Assessment came up, Josh made sure he was at the head of the pack, and doing his best, but holding back maybe 10% just in case he needed it later. This reminded him of his PST over 2 years ago, and he did about what he did on his PST before entering BUDS. He did the sit-stretch easily, then since the curl-up was easier than the sit-ups required for PST, he managed 103 in 2 minutes, then he switched to push-ups and did 85 within the 2-minutes allowed. He elected to do the 500 yard swim, and reported to the pool in his SEAL trunks and swimming goggles. Even with the in-pool start, he knew how to do a log-roll turn, and was able to swim 500 yards using a crawl stroke in a little over 7 minutes. When LCDR Lewis got his scores the next day, he called Josh in to his office. "I got a look at your PST scores, and I can tell you were sandbagging the PFA. I want to know why!"

"Sir, all I had to do was qualify. I didn't want to risk injury going all out, because if I'm seriously injured, I might lose my slot in the teams, then I'd be stuck in the Fleet."

"I understand your CO gave you a waiver to return to your team - Being a SEAL means that much to you?"

"Yes Sir, I told my CO that if I couldn't return to my team after OCS, I'd rather not go."

"Luckily for you, when I was a Chief Petty Officer, I knew some SEALs, and I know how dedicated you are to your teams, so I'm not going to write you up."

"Thank you Commander Lewis, All I want to do is finish OCS with a rating of Outstanding so I can go back to my team as an Ensign."

"It says here you're a Hospital Corpsman. Which means that they need you in the teams, so I agree. Now get back to training, and not a word of this."

"Yes Sir!"

"Dismissed."

Josh turned and marched out of LCDR Lewis' office, and rejoined his class, grateful to have dodged a bullet.

They spent the next couple of weeks in the classroom, Josh's favorite class was the Engineering class where the instructor explained how turbines, diesel engines, and nuclear or steam reactors worked. Every time he heard "You will see this again" he wrote down what the instructor said. He learned to do that from BUDS, and it always paid off when it showed up on a test. Josh already knew quite a bit about Navigation, but shipboard navigation was something new. Most of the Seamanship course was review from Basic Training, but on a more advanced level, so he

made sure he paid attention. His first trip through the Damage Control simulator was scary, but he handled it. Several candidates panicked, and flunked the simulation. They would be given another chance, or they would be dropped from OCS, and returned to the fleet. Josh already had a lot of practical experience in Naval Leadership, but appreciated the fresh viewpoint and additional information he got from the class. The class on Military Law was an eye-opener, and he learned more than he thought was possible about the way the Military Justice system worked. He had a hard time staying awake through the Special Awareness Program, because if a SEAL ever had problems with Drugs or Alcohol, he didn't remain a SEAL much longer. The counterespionage briefing was so much hot air. SEALs dealt with classified stuff on a daily basis, and SEAL officers were exposed to Code Word classified documents all the time. Operational Security was drilled into the youngest tadpole in BUDS, and reinforced daily or weekly. Most SEALs had a Top Secret Clearance, and some had Code Word or Crypto clearances, which were far past the scope of the briefing.

During the 13 week period, they had numerous inspections, which he passed with flying colors. LCDR Lewis told him that he was the most squared away sailor he had seen in OCS in over a year. He breezed through his personal inspection, and LCDR Lewis later told Josh that his uniform looked so sharp that he should pose for a recruiting poster. Josh quipped that they better do it before he reported back to the TEAMS and his hair grew longer. LCDR Lewis laughed at the image of a SEAL with a non-regulation haircut in dress blues, somehow he could imagine the Secretary of the Navy's reaction. Finally it was time for Graduation Day, and Josh was careful to perfectly locate every badge, rank and rate insignia properly on his uniform jacket. It took a long time to correctly pin every medal he had won on his jacket. Finally after passing in review, he stood at attention while the CO of Officer Training Command pinned his Ensign's bars on his collar. Once the bars were in place, Josh snapped a perfect salute, which was returned by the CO. Finally he was an Officer and a Gentleman, and a newly minted Ensign. A couple of days later, he was back on a plane to San Diego. When he got to the Naval Special Warfare Command Center, he was met at the quarterdeck by a senior chief, who saluted Josh since he was in uniform. Josh returned the salute, then the Chief said "Welcome home Ensign Williams."

"Thanks Chief. What do I need to do, who do I check in with?"

"You just did - go get a new room at the BOQ then check in with your team."

"Thanks Chief - see ya later!"

Josh picked up his sea bag, and marched off to get a new room at the BOQ.

Chapter 72 - Under Fire

Several Years later, somewhere in the South American Jungle

“Fall back and Regroup.” {Sounds of Full Auto Fire, grenades, whistles from near misses, and Spanish-sounding voices shouting - a lot of them}

The SEALs did their well-rehearsed “Break Contact” Drill, except this time the enemy wasn’t playing along. Lt. Josh “Doc” Williams didn’t know what he had run into, but it was much bigger than the drug lord’s personal army they were expecting. The SEALs were running for their lives, low on ammo, and up against a superior force. Suddenly his CO, LCDR. Steve “Big Dog” Nelson dropped behind a large log and set something in front of it. Josh immediately recognized it as a Claymore, and kept running. Once Big Dog had the detonators installed, he quickly unrolled the wires and attached them to the twist detonator. He ran 25 yards further back, and dove behind the next log, with Josh sitting next to him. Suddenly a SEAL vaulted the log yelling “Last Man”, so Big Dog knew the enemy was right behind him. He waited until a large group of enemy showed themselves, and got within point-blank range of the Claymore, then he twisted the handle, firing the Claymore, and thousands of steel balls were explosively hurled into the massed enemy, killing 2/3 of them, and severely wounding the rest, who were at the back of the pack. Suddenly to his right, Josh heard the dreaded yell “Doc” and he got up to tend the wounded SEAL. Big Dog fired several short bursts from his M - 4 to keep any survivors from shooting back, and Doc landed with a thud next to his swim buddy Chief Jack “Eagle” Sharp. He looked him over, and could see he’d taken a through and through round to the leg. He asked Jack if he could walk on it, and Jack nodded, so Josh bandaged it tightly, since they had a long way to go to their assigned pickup. Jack grimaced as Josh pulled the bandage tight to stop the bleeding.

Josh looked at Steve, who yelled to be heard over the gunfire “Let’s get the flock out of here!” then Josh helped his buddy Jack up. Jack was limping, but could move quicker on his own than with a SEAL carrying him. Big Dog got a bearing to their pick-up point, and hoped the Pave Low would be on time. They still heard sporadic gunfire behind them. To say that Big Dog and Doc were pissed would be an extreme understatement. Some Intel squirrel didn’t read the tea leaves right, resulting in a blown mission, and a wounded SEAL. Josh realized there was more truth than he realized to the old saw “We bet your life” when it came to Intel. He remembered the line from MASH about “Military Intelligence” and laughed to himself. He checked his gear as he ran, and he was down to his last 2 30-round magazines for his UZI, and he had 1 mag in his P-14, and 2 spares after that. He started praying they would make it to the Pave Low without further contact. He thought someone might be out looking for them, because this last group was the third heavily-armed group they had ran into today, when the Intelligence Officers swore the only armed men were the small bunch of mercenaries guarding the drug lord they were supposed to snatch. Not only was he not there, but Josh suspected they had run into several groups of FARC guerillas since they were so heavily armed and well trained. If they survived and got

back to the States, he was going to find out who screwed up even if it cost him his bars. Josh didn't know, but that was the exact same thought rolling through LCDR Nelson's mind right about now, except he was even lower on Ammo than Josh was, and once he shot out his last mag from the M - 4, he'd be down to his personal sidearm. He grabbed the microphone from his radioman and yelled "Birddog, this is Point, Dry Hole, lots of company, need emergency extract at Alpha."

"Roger Point, Emergency extract at Alternate Alpha in 10 mikes."

"Confirm, Alpha in 10 mikes."

He threw the microphone back to his radioman, and told the team "We're moving to Alpha for an emergency extract in 10 mikes. Drop everything and prepare to make a run for it." Josh knew that as the Corpsman, he could drop only some of his gear, the rest might be needed to save the team if they got shot. He dropped everything he could, then told Jack he'd stay with him, and carry him if necessary.

Big Dog turned to Doc and said "You're Tail-end Charlie. Don't let any SEALs get behind you. I'm taking point. If you're not to Alpha in 10 minutes, it was nice knowing you!"

Doc flipped him the bird and said it was nice knowing him too! They stood up and started jogging as fast as they could. Alpha was almost 1 mile away, and they had less than 10 minutes to get there. Now Josh understood why the SEALs were so adamant about being able to run a mile and a half in 8 minutes. Now his life and the lives of his Teammates depended on it. Jack was keeping up, but collapsed with 100 yards to go when he tripped on a vine. Josh picked him up and carried him the last 100 yards right as the huge Pave Low set down. All 3 door gunners were on their mini-guns, but there were no targets in sight, so they didn't shoot. Right as Josh climbed aboard, Big Dog gave the pilot the "thumbs-up", and he lifted off. As soon as they were airborne, Josh started an IV of Ringers, and told Eagle to rest easy it was just a flesh wound. "Easy for you to say Doc, you're not the one with the bullet in the leg!" Josh opened a Syringette of Morphine and gave him half, then wrote a big M on his forehead and the time, then bent the needle of the syringette and stuck it in his collar. He made sure Jack was comfortable, then checked his pulse, and told him to take it easy.

"Just take it easy Eagle, you've now got half as many Purple Hearts as Sen. Kerry!"

"Too bad he didn't get one for getting shot in the head!"

When the team heard that one, there were gales of laughter, and a couple of Sierra Hotel's from in back.

2 weeks later back at Coronado, Josh and LCDR Nelson met with their CO. "Word is you two think Intel screwed the pooch, and you want some heads. I've got news for you, but it can never

leave this room. Your mission was blown from the start by some Congressman or his aide who couldn't keep their big mouths shut. We're looking into it. I thought I'd tell you so you wouldn't punch out the first Intelligence Officer you saw and lose your bars over a mistake."

Josh and LCDR Nelson both relaxed, realizing that DC had blown it again. They both were thinking "Why do the SEALs bother with security clearances at all, when some idiot in DC can open his big mouth, get some SEALs killed, and not get punished? Maybe they should just take out an advertisement in the Washington Post listing the dates and times of their next 10 missions?" Suddenly Josh realized what Bear meant when he was always asking Gene if it was time yet. Right now he was so mad that if he had a TLAM-N, he'd personally load the coordinates for DC and launch it himself.

"Permission to speak candidly Admiral?"

"Granted, but realize I feel exactly like you do right now."

"Why do we bother with Security when some Idiot in DC can open his fat trap and get us killed, but not get punished in the least way?"

"I've asked that question myself numerous times. I'd like to see a bunch of the most loose-lipped Senators hung or shot, and that would convince the rest to keep their lips zipped."

Once the Admiral had accomplished what he needed to - keep two of his best officers out of the brig, he dismissed them to get back to his paperwork. On the way back to the Team barracks, Big Dog told Doc "You know we can never tell the team the mission was blown from DC, several of the younger members might book a 1-way trip to DC to take care of the problem personally."

"Agreed, but it still makes me furious."

"Just keep it under your hat."

"Aye, Aye Sir!"

When they got back, the good news was Eagle was out of the infirmary, and would be mission capable in a month.

Chapter 73 - Out of the Frying Pan

Shortly after his 30th birthday, Josh put in for 2 weeks leave and flew with his Team Leader for a 2-week vacation in Australia. They were quickly discovered by the local Sheilas at a local pub. One beautiful girl seemed to catch his eye, but didn't seem to be impressed by his lines. She introduced herself as Sheila Bannon and said she was on holiday from the University where she was studying for her doctorate in Marine Biology. Before she left for the evening, she handed him her business card with a phone number and e-mail address at the University, and told him to call her if he wanted to go to church with her on Sunday morning. Since she was a total babe, and he had nothing better to do, he called her voice mail the next morning, and left a number where he could be contacted. 2 hours later, she told him to be waiting out front of his hotel Sunday morning at 0800, and she'd pick him up and give him a lift to church. She said to dress nice, but he didn't need to wear a suit. Josh rummaged around, found a clean shirt and tie, and a pair of chinos that still fit. The next morning, he was out front of the hotel at 0800, when this beautiful redhead wearing a stunning sun dress pulled up in a robin's egg blue Toyota Land Cruiser, and unlocked the door. As he bent down to open the door, he recognized Sheila from the night before. She was even more beautiful in the daylight. He sat down, closed and locked the door, and secured his lap/shoulder harness. She headed back out into traffic, and 20 minutes later, they arrived at this plain-looking building that didn't look like any churches Josh had seen before, since there was no steeple or stained glass. When she stopped the car she said "Sorry, where's my Manners? I'm Sheila Bannon, and we're at the First Church of Christ of Sydney. I don't normally pick up guys and ask them to church, but I just sensed something in you that I liked."

"Sheila, I grew up in a decent Christian family, but I haven't been as diligent in my walk since I joined the SEALs, so going to a good church with a pretty lady would make my day."

They got out of the car and walked hand in hand to church. Josh liked the singing, even though he couldn't sing a note, and was very moved by the pastor's sermon about the Prodigal Son, and thanked the pastor on their way out.

"Ok, Josh, I've got the rest of the day, what do you want to do?"

"I want to spend it with you, but not someplace where I'd be tempted to make out with you. Hopefully someplace pretty we could talk." They got into Sheila's Land Cruiser and drove to the Observatory Hill Park, which she said was one of the prettiest views in Sydney.

They spend the rest of the day talking. Sheila told Josh that she had a little over a year to go for her PhD in Marine Biology, and Josh told her that he was right in the middle of a 20-year SEAL career, and he was up for promotion to Lieutenant Commander, and the command of his own Seal Team. Neither of them were looking for anything serious, so they enjoyed the afternoon together. Right before they went back to her car, a guy approached them, flipped out a

switchblade and demanded Josh's wallet. Instead, quick as a cat, Josh drew and extended his collapsible baton with a snap of his wrist, reversed his swing and tagged the elbow of the assailant's knife hand with the tip of the steel baton, traumatizing the nerves in his elbow, and numbing his hand to the point that he dropped the knife and ran screaming in agony, holding his injured arm with his other hand.

"We'd better split before the cops show up, I don't want to have to explain why I'm carrying a baton in Sydney."

"Good idea, the constables here don't look favorably on anyone carrying weapons, even something as innocent as a collapsible baton."

"Sheila, were I come from in Alaska, everyone walks around openly armed, there is zero crime and hasn't been for almost 20 years. We even have a company/town shooting range, and my friend Bear owns a survival school with a 1,000-yard range that we used to go shooting at all the time."

"Wow, I'd love it there, the only place we can go armed is out at my parent's Station in the Northern Territories. It's in the middle of nowhere, so the pantywaists that run the government pretty much leave us alone out there."

Josh was laughing to himself, she sounded just like he did! If things were different, maybe he could settle down with someone like her! That idea brought him to a full stop. He had a trust fund worth over \$10 Million plus his accrued Military pay, since he lived on base in the BOQ, and put most of it in the bank. He loved his mom and dad, and missed his brother and sister, but he could be happy anywhere in the world as long as he was married to a woman that loved him. Sheila was a beautiful red head with long hair, emerald green eyes and a killer body. He wondered how she looked in a wet suit, remembering the story his Dad told them about the time Nancy almost gave Bear a heart attack when he saw her in a 3/4 wetsuit. Looking at Sheila, he hoped she owned a 6/4 wetsuit, or he'd have problems concentrating on diving! On the way back to his hotel, he found out she was on her semester break, and didn't have to be anywhere special. He asked where he could reach her tomorrow, because if they wanted to spend any more time together, he'd have to ask for extended leave. The US Navy owed him a bunch of Leave, so if his team weren't doing anything, his CO could grant up to 30 days leave. When they got out, her goodnight kiss told him that he'd better put in for the full 30 days, and she handed him a card with the number where she was staying. When he got back to the hotel, he talked to Steve, who was now a full Commander. "You wouldn't believe the girl I met. We haven't done anything but talk, and she just gave me a real hot goodnight kiss. She's a good Christian woman, and almost finished with her Doctorate in Marine Biology. I'd like to request permission to extend my leave for a full 30 days."

"Permission Granted, make sure you clear it with the CO. Good Luck Josh!"

Steve gave Josh a “guy hug” then they went down for dinner. After dinner, Josh called his CO on his secure shoe phone, and he authorized an additional 30 days leave since his team had no missions scheduled for at least 60 days, and they weren’t going to be the Alert team for the next 6 months, since they had already been the alert team twice this year. He thanked his CO and gave Steve the good news, then called Sheila. Since he had another 30 days, she suggested borrowing a friend of her’s Catalina Amphibian that was set up as a live aboard diving platform with compressors, spare tanks, shower and head facilities, and comfortable beds. Josh blushed at the mention of beds, and hoped he could stay on his own bed. She said she’d pick him up first thing in the morning, and to check out of the hotel, and bring all his stuff, she’d keep him busy for the next 30 days. She said “See you tomorrow at 0800, bye!” and hung up. Josh called downstairs and asked that they check him out effective 0800 tomorrow. The Hotel Manager said that it would be taken care of. Since he’d already given them his American Express card, all he had to do was deposit his key in the drop box, and pick up a copy of his bill that would be waiting for him.

Steve went back to his team the next morning, and Josh checked out. He walked out the front door, and Sheila was sitting there with her Land Cruiser. They loaded up all his stuff, and she commented how heavy his duffles were. He said that even though he was on leave, he had to carry his go bag everywhere, so he could be wherever he needed to be in 24 hours with all his gear. They drove to the nearest Royal Australian Air Force base, and they presented their ID’s, and the gate guard gave them directions to Sheila’s friend’s office near the flight line. He gave Sheila a warm hug, then shook Josh’s hand. Josh handed him his military ID, and Nicolas (Nick to his friends) told him they had reserved a PBY for their exclusive use for the next 30 days. It used to belong to an Admiral who was really into diving, and had the RAAF configure it as a live-aboard diving platform with fresh water tanks, a desalinator, water heater, showers, a small galley, and a small bedroom with 2 twin beds. They had already loaded filled air tanks with modern diving gear, masks, fins, snorkels, and weight belts. Josh had his own gear in his bag, but thought it was a nice touch. When they mentioned wet suits, Josh looked at Sheila, and said “I hope you’ve got a 6-4 suit!”

“Why’s that?”

“Otherwise I might have problems concentrating on diving!”

Sheila laughed and said “Don’t worry, I brought both, and if you can’t stand the excitement, I’ll wear the 6-4!”

Josh turned to Nick and said “Who’s going to fly this thing, I’m not type rated in the Catalina.”

Sheila smiled and said “You’re a Pilot?”

“Yup, my dad owns Allakaket Airlines, and I’ve had my Commercial ticket with my sea endorsement since shortly after my 16th birthday. I’ve got hundreds of hours in the Grumman

Super Goose.”

Nick looked at him with amazement. “You’ve got HOW many hours in the Super Goose?”

“My dad helped Northrop-Grumman and the RCAF design the SuperGoose, based on the design of his Turbogoose.”

“What did you say your name was?”

“Josh Williams, why?”

“Ok, that’s right, the owner of Allakaket Airlines is Ron Williams. The RAAF has wanted to buy the SuperGoose for years. Can I tell my wing commander that you’ve got all this experience in the Super Goose? I’m sure he’d like to talk to you.”

“Maybe later, if I know Sheila, she’ll have me busy for the next 30 days.”

Sheila smiled and said “Lucky for us Mr. Williams that I AM type-rated in the Catalina. Nick here is my oldest brother’s best friend, and taught me how to fly as soon as I was old enough. I’ve got the equivalent of your FAA Commercial rating, with my Sea endorsement as well, and I’m type rated in the Catalina, so let’s get your stuff stowed and get going, co-pilot!”

Josh couldn’t help himself, and saluted her in the British style “Aye, Aye Sir!”

She replied “Just remember that later!”

They climbed aboard the Catalina, stowed Josh’s gear, then opened the cockpit door. Inside was a modern avionics suite, including the latest GPS moving map display, surface and air search/navigation radar, IFF gear (it was a military plane after all) and one of the best aviation radios Josh had seen in a while. Sheila slid into the pilot’s seat, and checked the GPS display, then programmed in several diving spots she wanted to show Josh. She told Josh that this Consolidated PBY was slow, but had a 2500 mile range. Since it had been de-milled, the range went up slightly, and they gained almost 50 knots airspeed to cruise at almost 150 knots. The GPS indicated a 10 hour flight to their first dive site assuming an airspeed of 150 knots. He was glad Sheila was so pretty and talkative, otherwise he might get bored flying for 10 hours.

They talked about everything on the way to the first dive site. He found out Sheila was the youngest of 6 kids, and the only one to get an advanced degree, but the rest all graduated college and returned to their station in the Northern Territories. She said it was a small station, only a couple hundred square miles, and they had their own airfield and 2 leased Turbo Commanders. Their most valuable asset was the really good wells they had which had never run dry in 100 years, like others had during prolonged drought. They raised sheep and cattle, like most stations did, and had a small garden for all the vegetables they needed. She was home schooled through

high school, and her test scores were high enough to get her accepted to the University of New South Wales in Sydney. It meant leaving home for the first time, but luckily her brother's best friend Nick owned a huge house in Sydney, and she was living there for free, in exchange for housecleaning duties when she wasn't studying. Nick was a life-long bachelor, like some Aussies, but had a steady stream of girlfriends. Josh could relate, and told her about his past, including the encounter with the SEAL groupie. Sheila admitted she wasn't a Virgin either, and until a few years ago had really loose morals, then she got invited to the church she now attended, and gave her life to Jesus. Josh said that wasn't important to him, but loyalty and love were. She put the plane on Autopilot, and gave Josh a big kiss, and said "Thanks for understanding. Several guys I dated that claimed to be Christians left me after I told them I wasn't a Virgin. I don't understand how some Christians could be so self-righteous. Jesus forgave the Prostitute, and told her to go and sin no more, and even Mary Magdalene was a prostitute at one time."

"Sheila, You were forgiven for everything you ever did, or will do when you accepted Christ. All you had to do was repent. Anyone who holds anything you've done before you accepted Christ is a Self-Righteous Hypocrite, and forgot everything they've been forgiven." She leaned towards Josh and he held her while she cried. She felt she was falling in love with Josh, but didn't want to say anything in case he might reject her, and she didn't want to get hurt again.

After about 5 minutes, she dried her eyes, and he looked into her eyes and said "I don't know how to tell you this, but I think I'm falling in love with you. I want to take it slow and get to know you, but my response so far has been "So far - so good." If we decide to get married, I'll resign my commission, since I'm sitting on almost \$12 million in a trust fund, plus 10 years of accrued Navy Pay. The last time I checked, it was almost \$15 Million total. I need to work like I need a hole in my head. I'm getting sick of the Navy anyway. It's not the NAVY per se, it's the damn politicians! My swim buddy almost bought it during a blown mission when some blowhard Congresscritter said something to the wrong person at a Washington party, and several other SEALS have been killed on blown missions. Sometimes I think our politicians are bigger enemies to freedom than the people they send us out to kill. If we got married, I could just chuck the whole thing and go back to being a civilian."

Sheila didn't say anything, just hugged the stuffing out of him and gave him a big kiss. When she crushed her chest into his, he really hoped she had a 6/4 suit handy, or he'd really be distracted. Finally she came up for air and said "Where have you been all my life?"

"Alaska!"

"Real funny Mr. Wiseguy!"

"You asked."

Several hours later, they arrived at the Great Barrier Reef. Sheila landed the Catalina like a pro,

and set down right where she wanted to be. They lowered a reef-safe anchor out of the starboard window to hold the plane over the diving spot, and Sheila went in back to get changed first. 10 minutes later, she opened the cabin door, and Josh was glad she was wearing a 6-4 suit, or else he might have said “forget the diving!” Even with the 6-4, she made Venus de Milo look like a scrawny Teenager. He squeezed by her, got into his swim trunks and wetsuit, then they popped open the port side blister, and installed a diving ladder. He helped her into her BC and tanks, being careful to avoid bumping her breasts, only to accidentally grope her when he helped her fasten the top strap of her BC vest. She must have been a very passionate woman, because she responded with a very passionate kiss, instead of slapping him silly. He said “Sorry that was an accident.”

“I didn’t mind, I was kind of hoping you’d do something like that. I’ve a confession, I sleep in the nude, and didn’t bring any PJ’s.”

“Me Neither, well this could get interesting!”

“Why fight it, neither one of us is a virgin!”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ve wanted to attack you since I first met you. Now that I know you love me, I really want to attack you!”

“Ok, but can we go diving first, and maybe get something to eat?”

“I can wait if you can.”

Chapter 74 - Into the Fire

When they got back from diving, Sheila took off her BC and her wetsuit, and kept going from there. When she was standing naked in front of Josh, she said “Well, what are you waiting for?” Josh got undressed as fast as he ever remembered, and suggested they start in the shower. He was glad to see the shower was big enough to hold them, barely. He picked her up when they were through and carried her to the bedroom.

The next morning they both had goofy grins on their faces. Sheila got up and made breakfast, then asked Josh if he’d rather stay in bed or go diving. Josh said that they should go diving, he needed a breather. They dove the other side of the reef they were anchored to, then ate lunch, and then Sheila asked Josh if that was enough of a breather. Several hours later, Josh got up and decided to see what was for dinner. They had several ribeye steaks in the refrigerator, and he rummaged around until he found a large cast iron skillet, got it heating, then found a bag of frozen veggie mix and popped that in the microwave. Sheila woke to the smells of steaks frying in the skillet. She slid into one of Josh’s longer t-shirts and walked out to check on dinner. She saw Josh slaving away over a hot stove, and decided to give him a hug from behind. Josh forgot all about dinner when he felt her warm body pressed against his back. “Sheila, settle down girl, or I’ll burn the steaks.” He turned around, and she gave him a big hug and a passionate kiss.

Josh looked at Sheila, and looked deep into her eyes. He saw love there, and knew she was the woman for him. He loved her more than life itself. He reached over, shut off the skillet, and gently cupping Sheila’s chin in his right hand and looking into her eyes, said “Sheila, will you marry me?”

Looking into his eyes, she saw real love, not just lust for the first time in her life, and realized that Josh was a good lover because he was making love to her, not just having sex. She felt all warm inside and almost started crying. Instead she kissed Josh and said “What took you so long dear, of course I’ll marry you! I’ve never loved anyone like you before in my life.”

Josh decided then and there to resign his commission and live in Australia with Sheila, since it would take her a year to earn her Doctorate.

“Sheila, what would you say if I told you I decided to resign my commission and live in Australia with you?”

“Why would you do that Josh, you’re giving up a career you love.”

“I don’t love it anymore, and even if I did, I love you more! You’ve still got a year to go on your doctorate in Marine Biology, so we should live somewhere where you could finish your degree, since you’re almost finished with this program, we should stay in Sydney.”

“If we want to get married now, we need to get moving, I’ve got to be back in school by the end of the month. You need to meet my parents, then we’ve got to get married somewhere.”

“How many relatives do you have in Australia?”

“Let’s see, my parents, siblings, their kids... say about 50.”

“Would you mind getting married in Alaska?”

“Why not, that sounds lovely. You’re planning on keeping your US citizenship - right?”

“That’s one of the reasons I wanted to get married in Alaska, the other one is we’d have to fly half the town here if we got married in Australia. My dad can charter a VIP jet to fly everyone to Alaska for the wedding, then fly them back.”

“So, you want to do any more diving?”

“Much as I’d love to, we’re on a tight time line. Let’s eat dinner, fly back to Sydney tomorrow morning, rent a twin turboprop and fly to your parent’s station. That way, I can buy you an engagement ring before your parents meet me.”

“Can we buy me a wedding dress while we’re in Sydney? There aren’t too many dress shops in the Northern Territories.”

“I looked on the map, the Northern Territories covers about 2/3 of the map. Can you pin it any closer?”

“Ok, we’re right outside of Hatches Creek, which is Northeast of Alice Springs. It’s about 1200nm northwest of Sydney.”

“Ok, that barely puts it within range of a Turbo Commander.”

“Funny you should mention that, we’ve got one parked at the airport.”

“Ok, let’s fly this slow old Albatross back to Sydney, buy your ring and dress, then fly the Turbo Commander back to your parent’s house so I won’t feel like getting out and pushing.”

“You poor baby, that SuperGoose must have spoiled you!”

“You’d have to see one to believe it - it’s got the same range and speed as your Turbo Commander, yet it’s bigger and an Amphibian!”

“Cool, I can’t wait. Meanwhile we still need to fly ole Bessy back to the barn. Too bad I don’t

totally trust the autopilot on this old bird, or we could join the Mile High Club!”

“I don’t think I could handle any more today.”

“We’ve got to stay overnight, I don’t want to land the Catalina on a runway in the dark.”

“Ok, I guess I could handle some more today.”

They crawled into bed, and spent the rest of the day holding each other. The first thing the next morning, Sheila made breakfast, while Josh secured the rest of the plane for flight. Once they were done with breakfast, they quickly cleaned up and stored the dishes, then climbed into the cockpit. They were quickly airborne headed to Sydney, and touched down at the RAAF base 10 hours later. Nick was waiting for them with a very sad look on his face, and handed Josh a note.

Josh:

Just wanted you to know. Your Team suffered a fatal accident yesterday. Commander Steve Nelson was killed, along with the pilot of the small plane they were practicing HALO jumps from. The investigation is inconclusive, but points to a maintenance problem. As you know, due to budget cuts, planes that should have been mothballed are put back into service, or planes that should be redlined for mechanical problems are being sent back with rebuild motors and other major parts. Sorry to use this impersonal means of conveying this message, but your shoe phone was off.

Admiral Nelson

Josh checked his “shoe phone” and it was on. He guessed there was no service where they were earlier. He dialed his CO’s #, and got a recording. He left a brief message and hung up, making sure the phone was still on. Josh looked at his Fiancé and decided that there wasn’t anything he could do for Commander Nelson, since he couldn’t get home in time for the funeral even if there was one, so he suggested they stop at a pub on their way to the jewelers, so he could have a drink in Big Dog’s memory. She gave Josh a big hug, and Josh said “that’s the way Steve would have wanted it. Also, now I’m sure I want to quit.” He called his CO’s number again, and this time Admiral Nelson answered the phone, after expressing his condolences for Josh’s loss, he told Josh the bad news. The plane he was flying should have been grounded and replaced years ago, but Congress kept dragging their heels funding replacements for the older transport planes the Military was forced to use for training purposes. SEALs had to routinely practice jumping out of all kinds of planes, and this was an old obsolete single-engine transport. When the engine sputtered and died, Steve gave the Abandon ship command, but his harness got stuck on the way out, and he couldn’t clear it in time, which resulted in the death the pilot and himself. They were flying low, and didn’t have time to recover from either the engine failure or Steve’s entanglement. When Josh heard it, he was livid, and told his CO he was

going to resign his commission and get married. He was tired of the BS, and didn't want to die because some Fat Cat in DC was too cheap to replace an old plane, or couldn't keep his lips zipped. The Admiral understood completely, and told him to contact his office when he got back to the CONUS, and they'd e-mail or fax the paperwork for him to sign. As of right now, he was on extended leave pending discharge from the military. The Admiral's only request was that he keep his shoe phone on. Josh explained they were diving on the Great Barrier Reef a couple of days ago, and the phone might have been in a dead area. Admiral Johnson said he'd check into it, the new phones weren't supposed to have any dead areas, since they used satellites. He wished Josh good luck and hung up. Sheila held Josh while he started crying. He lost his best buddy, and his career was over. He was officially out of the Teams. Then he looked into the face of Sheila, and realized it was all worth it, and kissed her. Nick said "Hey, you two want to get a room?"

Josh told him the gist of the letter and his conversation with Admiral Johnson, then asked him if he'd like to go to a pub with them, and drink a toast to the memory of Commander Steve "Big Dog" Nelson. Nick teared up a little, and suggested the base pub, since the Military Men there would understand and appreciate such a gesture. They climbed into Nick's Hummer, and were at the base pub 10 minutes later. Nick ordered the first round, a pint of Stout Ale for the 3 of them. Then Josh stood up and asked for the attention of the patrons.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I'd like to buy the house a round so you can drink a toast with me to a fallen comrade. My SEAL team commander, Steve "Big Dog" Nelson died the other day in a training accident." Once the bartender had filled everyone's glass, Josh raised a shot of Bushmills and said "Here's to you Big Dog, God Rest your Soul." He drank the shot straight down to shouts of "Here, Here!" then he dissolved into tears while Sheila held him. When he regained his composure, he paid the barman, and walked out the door, only to be stopped by a Sergeant Major.

"Sir, I'd salute you if you were in uniform, but instead could I shake your hand, and offer my condolences. What you just did took Class, and I'll remember Big Dog for quite a while. I've had the pleasure to meet several SEALs during my 30 years in the RAAF. You sir are a credit to the Teams, Godspeed and thanks!" He stuck out his hand, and Josh shook it, still wiping away some tears.

When they got out to the Hummer, Sheila told Nick they were going to get married in Alaska, then come back to Sydney to live until she finished her Doctorate. Nick offered them a huge room in his house that was twice the size of Sheila's for half the utilities and 200 dollars per month rent. Sheila knew that rents for rooms that size went for double that in Sydney, and she also knew how hard it was to get an apartment in Sydney, and accepted in a heartbeat. She asked if Nick could afford it, and he said that once they were established, they'd probably start having kids, and need a place of their own, so he could afford it for a couple of years. Josh thanked Nick, and said he'd get in touch with him when they got back. Nick hugged Sheila, and shook Josh's hand, and wished them luck, then they climbed into Sheila's Land Cruiser and

drove over to a nearby jeweler's. He had a ring that fit her finger perfectly, with a ½ carat round near-flawless ice blue diamond in a low solitaire mount. Josh took out his AMEX card, and paid for it while the Jeweler had it polished and ultrasonically cleaned. Next they drove to a dress shop where they had a huge selection of white wedding dresses. 2 hours later, Sheila had her dress picked out. Josh knew he still had a Black tuxedo in his closet in Allakaket from his Brother's wedding that should fit. With that out of the way, they drove to the airport where her Turbo Commander was hangared, and had it pulled out, serviced and fueled while she filed a flight plan from Sydney to Hatches Creek. Once the flight plan was filed, they loaded the plane and boarded it. Since Josh wasn't type rated in the aircraft, he flew right seat, but thoroughly enjoyed the flight. At 300 knots, it took a little over 4 hours to reach Hatches Creek. She called ahead, and landed on their private airstrip, which turned out to be way bigger than Josh thought it was. He asked Sheila how big it was, and she said they built it big enough to land medium jets. The runway was 100 feet wide, and 10,000 feet long, with no obstructions to either side for 400 feet. Josh thought fast, and made a mental note to see if his Dad could charter a Boeing 727-100/ER plane configured with 50 VIP seats. He hoped Quantas or one of the other Australian airlines had a plane available for charter at a reasonable price. When they landed, they were met by an older man driving an old beat up pick up. Sheila jumped out of the aircraft as soon as the propellers stopped, ran to him and yelled "Daddy!" so Josh assumed that was her Dad. When he walked up to him, Sheila introduced Josh "Daddy, this is my Fiancé Josh Williams. Josh, this is my Daddy, Jack Bannon."

"Mr. Bannon, I'm glad to meet you."

"Josh, please call me Jack, we don't stand on formalities in Australia."

"We don't either in Alaska, I just didn't want to seem too forward."

"Sheila said you were her Fiancé, so when you getting married?"

"As soon as we can fly everyone to Alaska. My dad owns Allakaket Airlines, and can charter a jet to fly everyone to Allakaket for the wedding."

"That's a long ways to fly for a wedding!"

"Beats walking!"

They both had a good laugh, and Josh pulled one of his duffle bags out of the plane, and set it on the ground. Then he turned to Sheila and said "Do you think a 727 could land and take off here?"

"Why, what are you thinking?"

"If Dad could charter a 727-100/ER for the flight to Alaska, we'd be an hour ahead of schedule

if they could meet us here, plus it would save the extra fuel between here and there, since it's almost a thousand nautical miles from here to Sydney. If the plane's only got a 5,000nm range, it would be a shame to fly everyone to Sydney, then fly the 727 all the way back over here without landing. It would save several hours flying time, plus over 1,000 miles of range."

"Josh, I like the way you think. I know of a charter company in Sydney that has a 727-100 in it's fleet that's configured as a VIP carrier. But why such a big plane?"

"We were hoping most of Sheila's relatives would be able to make it, since the plane seats 50 easily."

"I doubt if more than 20 of her relatives would be able to go, even if the flight were free."

"Jack, we'd never charge you or your family to fly anywhere. My Dad owns a huge feeder airline that works with Alaska Airlines. He's probably worth almost \$100 million by now, and my personal trust fund's worth \$15 Million easy. Money is no object."

"Let's get to the house and make some calls, I'll have Ernie stow your plane."

"If you think a 727 can land here, I need to get the rest of my stuff."

Between the 2 of them, they hauled all of Josh's bags into the bed of the pickup.

"What you got in those bags, lead?"

"Among other things, that's my Go Bag. Until this afternoon, I was a Lieutenant on a US Navy SEAL team."

"What do you mean "Until this afternoon?"

"Daddy, Josh resigned his commission. He got sick and tired of all the Political BS, and now his friend and Team leader died in a stupid training accident because some congressman was too cheap to include enough money in the budget to replace the older transport planes, or fix them."

"I guess with a \$15 million trust fund, you need the money like you need a hole in the head."

"Exactly Jack. I didn't want to die in some South American Jungle just because some Congressman or his aide couldn't keep their big mouth's shut. Not only that, but I have a sneaky suspicion that the men they're sending us to capture and kill are no worse than the Political Fat Cats in DC."

"You're probably right there."

They got inside the truck, and drove to their house. It was a huge ranch style house, and it was several miles away from the runway, located next to a windmill that pumped water from a deep aquifer that Jack said hadn't ran out in over 100 years. When the truck stopped, Sheila's mother was standing in the doorway to greet them. Sheila ran up to her mom, gave her a big hug, and when Josh got close enough, she said "Mom, this is my fiancé, Josh Williams. Josh, this is my Mom, Nellie Bannon."

"Ma'am. Nice to meet you."

"Please call me Nellie, I'm sure Jack's already told you we're not formal out here."

"Thanks Nellie, Please call me Josh."

Nellie gave Josh a motherly hug, and thought "Looks like Sheila's got herself a winner" and smiled. She asked them all inside for dinner. Once they were seated Jack said grace, and they all said "Amen." After dinner, and some small talk, Josh excused himself, saying he needed to call his parents. He reached into his pocket, extracted his "shoe phone" and called home.

"Mom, Hi It's Josh. Is Dad there? Great, can you put him on the extension, and switch on the speaker phone if anyone else is there? Mom, Dad, I'm getting married. I'm sitting in her living room right now with her parents. My phone can send video if you can receive it. OK, I'll give Dad a second to set up. Jack, Nellie, Sheila, could you gather round so I can send your picture to my parents?" When Ron said he was ready, he turned around, put his arm around Sheila, and pointed the built-in camera at the group and pushed a button. When he looked at the display, he could see that he got a nice head and shoulders shot of the foursome. When Josh got back on the phone, Ron told him that he got it, and he'd tell everyone. He asked Josh when they were getting married, and where, so they could be there.

Josh said "That's what I wanted to ask you. We wanted to get married in Allakaket, and wanted to know if you could charter a 727-100 to fly Sheila's family to Anchorage, then we could fly them to Allakaket using the SuperGoose and the helicopters if necessary."

Ron asked Josh if they had a computer connected to the internet. Jack nodded yes, and Josh asked for their E-mail address. He gave it to his Dad, and he said he'd e-mail a purchase order authorizing the charter through Allakaket Airlines. Josh told his Dad that Jack knew of a local Australian company that had a 727-100/ER for charter with a 5,000 nautical mile range that was configured for VIP transport. 5 seconds later, the PO appeared in Jack's in-box, and he printed it out and saved it. Jack noted that the name of the charter company was blank, as was the dollar amount. Josh thanked his Dad, and said he'd call him when they had the details worked out, but they should be in Allakaket within the week. He told his Mom and Dad that he loved them, and he'd see them soon, then said Bye and hung up. Meanwhile Jack had located the charter company over the internet, and sent them an e-mail with a copy of the Purchase Order. An hour later, the leasing agent replied that the plane was available, and they could take

Allakaket Airline's PO since they were in the FAA database. Jack asked him to reserve the plane, and he'd give them a passenger count as soon as he had it.

Jack got on the phone, and called all of Sheila's relatives. Even including a free trip, he could only get her 20 closest relatives to come. Most made up some excuse or another, and the rest were just too busy or too far away to really care. Jack told Josh that they could only get 20 people to come, and Josh said that would just mean more room on the plane, since anything over 10 people would be crowded and cramped on a smaller plane. Jack e-mailed the charter company with a passenger count of 24, and a destination of Anchorage Alaska, with a 3 day lay-over. The leasing agent quoted their best rate they only give other airlines of \$30,000 round trip for 24 passengers with 50 pounds of luggage each, and a dollar per pound for anything over 1,200 pounds of luggage total. Josh filled in the figures on the computer copy of the PO, and e-mailed it to the leasing agent, and stipulated the pick-up point would be their private airfield at the following GPS co-ordinates, and included the GPS co-ordinates for their runway, and the dimensions. The leasing agent talked it over with the Operations supervisor, who told him that runway was well within their landing and take-off parameters, and to include a rider that if their runway wasn't up to snuff, and damaged the plane or the tires, they were responsible for it, since it wasn't a hard-surface runway. The leasing agent included the proper riders, and Jack replied that the runway was properly designed to handle smaller jets, and they shouldn't have any problem. The Leasing agent replied that the riders were CYA for the charter company in case the runway caused major damage to the plane.

Jack called everyone who said they could go, and told them to meet them at their private runway at 0800 tomorrow morning, with a carry-on and a single suitcase not to exceed 50 pounds. Jack e-mailed the charter company, and told them to have the plane on the runway at Hatches Creek, ready to load and take off at 0800. The leasing company asked if Jack had any Jet fuel, and he said he had a 20,000 gallon tank of JP-5. They asked if they could buy enough fuel to fill their tanks, and give them another 1,000 miles of range without having to land and refuel. If he would let them, they'd deduct the going price of the fuel from their bill. Jack asked if they could pay him direct, since he didn't own Allakaket Airlines, his future son-in-law was the son of the owner, and they were flying to a wedding in Alaska. The agent said that they could mail a check, or send a tanker with replacement fuel. Jack took them up on the offer replace the fuel, since his tank was getting below half.

The next morning, everyone was packed and on the runway at 0800 when the big jet landed, touched down lightly, and as soon as it was down, engaged full reverse thrust. When it stopped, they turned the aircraft around, and taxied up to the crowd, then shut down the engines while they boarded. Jack walked up front, introduced himself to the pilot and co-pilot, and told them where the fuel farm was, and that someone was waiting there to help them fuel the plane. Once everyone was boarded, and their luggage loaded, the pilots did a quick walk-around, checking that the baggage compartment and passenger doors were sealed, then taxied to the fuel farm, took on a max load of fuel, and turned to take off into the wind. They had plenty of fuel, since it was a little over 4,000 Nautical Miles to Honolulu, their fuel stop, and just over 2800 from

there to Anchorage Alaska, for a total of around 7,000 air miles, at 500 knots, it would take around 8 hours to reach Honolulu, and depending on how much time they spent on the ground getting refueled and serviced, it would be another 6 hours or so to Anchorage. Even with VIP seating, 14 hours in the air was a long flight. Sheila commented that there was a Master Suite, and if Josh ever wanted to join the Mile High club, they could do it in comfort. He knew they were facing a 14-hour flight, and realized that joining the mile-high club was a good way to pass a bunch of time, plus he was so in love with Sheila that he loved making love to her, feeling her body next to his, and knowing that he was making her feel so good!

8 hours later they landed in Honolulu, and Nellie had a couple of words with Sheila, and they decided that Sheila and Josh should spend the rest of the trip in the forward cabin with their clothes on.

Chapter 75 - Hatfield's and McCoy's

When they landed in Anchorage, they taxied to the VIP terminal, where they were met by 4 SuperGoose planes. Josh noticed one was decorated with a red ribbon and bow. His Mom and Dad were the first to greet them, and once they stepped off the plane, Jack and Nellie were glad they followed Jake's advice and dressed warmly. It was fall in Australia, but late Spring in Alaska, and there was still snow on the ground, and the air was freezing cold. They all wore their sheepskin lined dusters and boots. Ron and Nancy were wearing their sheepskin jackets, and once introductions were made, Ron told Josh that the SuperGoose with the red ribbon on it was a wedding present, and he could fly his fiancé, Jack, and Nellie back to Allakaket, and the rest of the clan would divide up among the 3 other SuperGoose. Josh gave his dad a big hug, and the 4 of them walked to Josh's brand new SuperGoose. When he opened the air stairs, he could see it was a upgraded convertible SuperGoose with VIP seats that were removable, the oxygen system, and all the Paramedic gear strapped to the bulkheads. Once Jack and Nellie were seated and strapped in, he did a quick walk around, and pointed out things to Sheila. Once they were satisfied, they climbed aboard, closed the air stairs, walked forward to the cockpit, and saw the new upgrades his Dad had installed in the new SuperGoose, including the upgraded pilot's seats, the first aid kit, and a complete bail-out kit and ditch kit for over-water flying. Josh guessed that Ron had decided to upgrade all the existing SuperGoose aircraft to the same equipment so they could transfer from 1 aircraft to the other without having to transfer any gear. Once he was finished Josh engaged the APU, and soon both turbines were in the green. Some nice person had taped his tail number above the radio, so he could ID himself to the tower.

"Allakaket Airlines, SG 145986 requesting permission for take-off."

"Tower, you're number 4 for take-off, please follow the other Allakaket Airlines aircraft to the proper runway. There are no altitude restrictions at this time."

"Roger tower, Allakaket Airlines out."

Josh guessed he was going to be Tail End Charlie in this convoy. Since he was the least experienced pilot in the group, Tail End Charlie was the place to be. While he taxied, he mentally reviewed the ski-borne take-off procedures. He remembered he had to go easy on the throttles, or he could skid off the runway sideways. He stopped 100 feet behind #3 in line and waited. His Dad took off first, then Jake, then Ralph, and finally it was his turn. They climbed to 2,000 feet, and a couple of hours later, the nav system beeped, indicating a programmed turn and descent to Allakaket. Josh disengaged the autopilot and flew the approach manually. He made a textbook snow landing, and taxied to the hangars. He was stunned when he got out, and his Hummer was waiting for him with the engine running and the heater on. They transferred their baggage to the Hummer, and the 4 of them followed the convoy to his Dad's house where the entire clan was waiting. Josh had more nieces and nephews this time than he did last time he was home, since Jake and Diane had a couple of more kids since last time, and Sarah had a

few more too. Jake and Diane were now the proud parents of 4 kids ranging in age from 12 to 5, and their names were Daniel, Rebecca, Samuel, and John in order. Sarah and Neil's brood included Rachael and Russell, and since he'd been back they had Robert and Rebecca. Josh laughed to himself, thinking they were really into names that started with R. David had finally settled down and married an Inuit woman from town named Isabel. He was 24 and she was 30 when they were married. She wasn't a beauty queen, but everyone in town respected her for her wisdom and common sense. She was raised all her life in an Inuit village far to the north of Allakaket, and had only moved to Allakaket 5 years ago when her parents died. Dave and Isabel built a house over by Jake and Diane since they had finally opened that end of the lake up to building. They too bought a 100-acre property with plenty of trees and access to the lake so they could fish. Dave worked from Home as a Graphic designer. He made steady money, but didn't really need it due to his trust fund. Ralph had given them a Snow Bug for a wedding present as well, so the entire family now owned Snow Bugs, and could get out any time they wanted except during blizzard conditions so they wouldn't get lost.

Once Josh got caught up with the family, he told his Dad that he needed to check with Bill about the wedding. Ron told his son everything had been taken care of, all they had to do was show up tomorrow at noon. With that settled Josh asked if they wanted to do anything. Sheila grinned, then thinking better of it, suggested they go shooting at Bear's range. That met with unanimous approval, and Ron called Bear and asked him if the range were open, they wanted to come up and shoot. Bear told them the range was vacant, and to come on up. Everyone threw their rifles and ammunition into the vehicles, and drove to the airport, then flew over to Bear's survival school. He had several ATV's with the beds in back, and piled on the gear, then they drove up to the range. Bear had tarps laid out at all the positions. Since there still was snow on the ground, he'd added Ensolite pads to the tops of the tarps to keep everyone from freezing. Josh asked Jack and Nellie on the way over what they wanted to shoot. They had scoped AR-15 HBAR Match rifles, M-1a's of various types with scopes, and a half dozen Barrett M -200 50 BMG rifles with monster scopes for shooting at 1,000 yards. Jack was incredulous. The longest shot he'd ever tried was 300 yards with his scoped Browning A-bolt.

Josh said that any one of his siblings with the exception of his youngest brother Dave were qualified shooting coaches, and could get him putting rounds in the black at 600 yards with a Springfield Super Match by the end of the afternoon. Jack said he'd like to try that, and asked if Josh could teach him. Josh demurred, saying he was going to spend time with Sheila and teach her how to shoot his personal M -25 at 600 yards, and maybe if they had time, teach her how to shoot the M -200 at 1,000 yards. Josh asked his Dad if he could work with Jack and Nellie, and he agreed in a heartbeat, and brought Nancy along with him. They set up on 2 adjacent lanes on the 300 yard line, to check out Jack and Nellie's marksmanship before they moved them to the 600-yard line, which could be frustrating if you didn't have near-perfect shooting technique. With Ron and Nancy acting as shooting coaches, they both soon were shooting groups in the black, so Ron suggested moving to the 600-yard line. They spent the rest of the day at the 600-yard line shooting progressively smaller groups, and developing an ear-to-ear grin.

Sheila had almost no experience with rifles, so Josh started slow on the 100 yard line with a scoped HBAR Match-grade Bushmaster AR-15 with a Leupold 3-12x50 scope. He gave her the complete safety lecture, showed her how to operate the rifle, and then had her do 20 dry fires, writing down where the crosshairs were when the trigger broke. With that finished, he handed her a loaded mag, and since she was already wearing her Gargoyle shooting glasses and Wolf Ears hearing protection, she was good to go. Once she loaded the mag, pulled the charging handle back, and settled behind the gun, she went into the calming technique that Josh had described, and she touched the trigger without being aware of it. Her first round was a bullseye, and she was hooked. Hours later, when she was shooting groups in the 10-ring or better, they moved to the 300-yard range, which he explained was a long shot for an AR-15. Once she got her group size down, and was comfortable with the gun, he asked if she wanted to shoot his M - 25. She jumped up and kissed him, so he took that as a “Yes” and went to get his rifle. They moved back to the 100-yard line to establish her zero, and Josh was amazed when Sheila’s first round went right through the bullseye without changing his scope settings. He had her shoot 2 more rounds to confirm her zero, and they were within ½ inch of each other. Josh was amazed, she was the first woman to shoot the same zero as he did!

He moved her to the 300-yard line and had her set the BDC turret to the 300-yard setting without touching anything else. When they had the bipod set up, she got behind the rifle, and noticed the wobble was pretty big. Realizing that she was inducing the wobble herself, she tried Josh’s routine again, and the wobble stabilized into a lazy-8 around the bullseye. She remembered all of Josh’s instructions, and shot as the reticle was crossing into the X-ring. She wrote down where the crosshairs were right when the trigger broke, just as Josh had taught her, then she got ready to fire a second round. After 5 rounds, the rifle clicked Empty, and Josh told her that he looked at her group through his spotting scope, and she had just shot a 5" group at 300 yards. She wrote that down too, along with the date, time, and environmental conditions. They kept it up, and over the rest of the afternoon, her groups got smaller and smaller. Around 5:00, she was visibly tired, and asked Josh if he wanted to shoot.

He kissed her, and walked over to uncase his M -200, and the 2 of them walked to the 1,000 yard line. Sheila thought he was nuts - she couldn’t see the targets at all! Josh set her down on his left side with a 60-power spotting scope so she could watch, and he got set up. When he was ready to shoot, he noticed his wobble was bigger than normal, so he went into his calming routine, reciting the 23rd Psalm. The next thing he knew, the gun was empty, and he had fired 5 rounds. Looking through the scope, he almost fainted when he realized all his rounds were inside the 5-inch X-ring. Sheila was giddy when she realized exactly what Josh had done. He had explained to her what a Minute of Angle was, and how tough it was to shoot sub-MOA groups at any distance. Now her fiancé had taken a rifle he just picked up and shot a sub-moa, actually a half-moa group at the unheard of distance of 1,000 yards. Ron was watching from a nearby table, and as soon as Josh got up, Ron ran over to him and gave him a big bear hug.

“Looks like all that practice with the sniper rifles has finally paid off. That group you just shot equals Jake’s best group, and you haven’t been practicing with this rifle.”

“Dad, I finally realize what you meant by being in the “Zone” - I don’t remember pulling the trigger even once. The next thing I knew, the magazine was empty, and all 5 rounds were in the X-ring.” The next thing he knew, Josh was surrounded by the rest of his Family, congratulating him on shooting a 5" group at 1,000 yards. Once the range was cleared, Bear drove down and collected Josh’s target, then asked him to sign and date it. Feeling maudlin about his “retirement” from the SEALs, he signed it Lt. Josh “Doc” Williams, USN SEALs (ret.) and dated it. Bear saw the inscription and gave Josh a big hug in front of everyone, and told Josh. “I know how you feel Brother, it broke me up inside when I retired from the Teams. Just remember, like Uncle Sam’s Misguided Children, Once a SEAL, always a SEAL. You retired with your honor intact. Bravo Zulu.” Now it was Josh’s turn to choke up! Sheila walked up to them and Josh turned into her arms and held her for the longest time. When they broke the clinch, his eyes were dry, and his mind was focused on the present. He was standing in front of the most beautiful woman in the world, who would become his wife tomorrow. He gave her a big kiss, then helped Bear put up all the rifles and gear.

When they got home, Nancy took Josh and Sheila aside. “Nellie told me about the shenanigans aboard the 727. I wanted you two to know that you’re sleeping in separate bedrooms tonight, those were Bill’s specific orders.”

“Mom, how come, we know each other now, so sleeping apart is kind of pointless.”

“If that’s how you feel, why are you getting married. Bill said that if you sleep apart, there is a sense of anticipation for your wedding night, instead of just another night sleeping together. I’m disappointed in the two of you, but I can’t undo what has already been done.” The look in her eyes told Josh more than she said, she was deeply disappointed in her son, and Josh knew he had messed up big time!

“Mom, I’m sorry. I can’t undo what happened, and Sheila and I really do love each other, and this just happened. We were planning on getting married anyway, so I just kind of put the cart before the horse.”

Nancy cooled off a little remembering that Josh was the impulsive one of her children, besides they WERE getting married the next day.

“Josh, your Grandpa and Grandma lived in a tiny little log cabin together before they were married, and they kept their hands off each other. Your father and I lived in the same house for a couple of months and we kept our hands off. You need to practice discipline. You display great discipline in shooting and other areas, now you need to apply it to your personal life.”

“Ok Mom, I never want to disappoint you again!”

Nancy turned to Sheila, and said “I just wanted you two to get off on the right foot. I’m sorry if I lectured you.”

“Don’t worry Nancy, my mom gave me the same lecture practically word for word when we came out of the rear cabin. I guess joining the mile high club with your parents in the cabin next door wasn’t one of my brightest ideas. Don’t be mad at Josh, it was my idea.”

“Just like Adam and Eve, he could have said “no”, so he’s not off the hook, but thanks for standing up for him and taking responsibility, that shows maturity.”

Nancy grabbed the two of them and gave them a big hug, then they went out and talked with the rest of their guests. Jack was talking to Ron, and commenting on how wild and free Alaska was. In Australia, they couldn’t even own a rifle like their M -25, and especially not their M - 200, which would cause the hanky-waving pantywaists in Parliament to throw a major snit! Ron told him they had a bunch of snit-throwing pantywaists in DC too, it’s just that Alaska was remote enough that they really didn’t have too much control over what went on here. Having a retired 3-star Special Forces General married to his mom didn’t hurt either. He told Jack about some of the preparations that Gene had taken to protect Allakaket, and why. Jack’s eyes got huge, and couldn’t fathom someone living in what amounted to an armed camp. Ron explained that most of the US felt the same as the rural interior of Australia - that we were responsible for our own safety, not some Government Nanny who only wanted to do what they thought was best for us.

Josh asked his dad if he could use the computer, he needed to send an e-mail to his CO. Ron told him to go ahead, and Josh sent an e-mail to Admiral Jackson. 10 minutes later, his reply was in his in box, with a bunch of separation papers to sign, including a voluntary discharge and resignation form. There was also a note from the Admiral, suggesting that his Uzi and all it’s attachments were lost in combat, and not in the inventory. Josh smiled at that subterfuge, knowing the Navy supply clerks would look the other way, since stuff was always getting lost. He told Josh to turn the rest of his gear into Elmendorf at his earliest convenience, and they’d ship it back to San Diego for him. Josh printed out the documents, then went through his gear, and removed everything that wasn’t USN property, including his P-14, Uzi, and the magazines and accessories for them including the suppressor. He packed the rest of it up, and made a note to himself to stop in Elmendorf on the way back to Australia and drop off his US Navy equipment.

Later that evening, they ate dinner, then went to bed. Josh and Sheila went to separate bedrooms, and the next morning everyone got dressed, ate breakfast, then they got into their wedding clothes. Jack and Nellie drove Sheila to the church in one vehicle while Ron and Nancy drove Josh in the other. They got to the church about 11:45, and Josh realized he had forgotten to get a best man. He asked his brother Jake, and when he said he’d be honored, he handed Jake 2 gold rings for the ceremony. Josh had already checked with Sheila and asked if she had any psychotically jealous ex-boyfriends. She said she didn’t, then Josh explained it to her, and told her not to worry, practically everyone in the family carried concealed 24/7. She said “Even in Church?”

“With our track record, especially in church.”

At about 11:55 Josh, Jake and Bill walked to the front of the church to await Sheila’s entrance. When the music started Sheila marched down the aisle on the arm of her dad, kissed him on the cheek, and Jack took his seat. Sheila took Josh’s hand, and they turned to face Bill, who began “Dearly Beloved...”

Just like the rest of his family, and probably grooms all over the world, the ceremony was a blur to Josh, until Bill got to the vows. Looking into the eyes of his bride, Josh said “I do!” 2 minutes later, Sheila echoed “I do!” Finally they exchanged rings, and Josh got to kiss his bride. Bill knew the Williams Clan could hold their breath a while, especially since Josh was a SEAL, so he didn’t become alarmed when they didn’t come right up for air. Finally they came up for air, and Bill turned them around. “May I present Josh and Sheila Williams. What God has joined let no man separate.” Most of the town was there sitting in the pews, which Josh’s family on one side, and Sheila’s on the other, and the townspeople scattered behind them. They filled the chapel to capacity, and after they made it down the aisle the townspeople assembled outside and pelted them with rice. The new couple walked next door to the Inn where a huge buffet table was set out. Josh was glad the new Inn was so huge, or they might not have had room for everyone. There was a wedding cake in the corner, and a huge pile of presents. After dinner, they cut the cake, Jake made a toast, and they were given the key to the Bridal Suite.

The next day, there was a note on their door to meet Josh’s parents at their house, so they drove Josh’s Hummer to his house. All his relatives, and Sheila’s relatives were there for a more intimate party. Ron and Nancy gave them the SuperGoose, and another \$10 Million. Josh was wrong, his Dad was worth closer to \$100 million by now, so \$10 million was a drop in the bucket to him. Jake gave him a cool Bowie knife, Sarah gave him a GPS receiver with a world-wide map function, and David got them a Katadyn water filter. Bear gave him a pair of BOB’s with some interesting stuff, including 2 M -4/ M -203 SOPMOD kits with 20 30-round mags each, 2 Level IIA vests with chicken plates, 2,000 rounds of SS-109 ammo, 2,000 rounds of 200gr Corbon JHP ammo, and another suppressed Mini-Uzi in 45 caliber with 20 factory magazines still in the original packaging. Gene gave them a pair of Federal CCW’s, and a letter from the Defense Department making Josh an official consultant to the M - 200 Barrett’s project, and authorizing him to carry Military hardware anywhere in the US. Anne crocheted a beautiful blanket/throw rug for them, and Steve gave them a ParaOrd P-14 Limited to match Josh’s with 6 14-rd mags, a Bladetech IWB holster, and 6 single-mag carriers to go with it.

When everyone was finished, Josh suggested going to the pistol range so Sheila could learn how to shoot her new pistol. On the way there, she asked what a Federal CCW was. Josh explained it allowed the bearer to legally carry anywhere in the United States except inside the White House, which was controlled by the Secret Service. Sheila’s eyes got big, she never heard that there was a way to legally carry anywhere in the country, and she always heard what a hassle it was to get a permit to carry concealed in any Australian city.

When they arrived at the range, Josh made Sheila put her eye and ear protection on, and pulled 200 rounds of FMJ practice ammo and 30 B-27 targets off the shelf. They set the pistol down, and Josh gave her the safety lecture, showed her how to load and unload the pistol, and how to work all the controls. Once she was familiar with the gun, they went through the dry fire routine using the Isosceles stance first, then the Weaver Stance. Josh rediscovered the fact that women with big chests prefer the Weaver stance because their elbows aren't jammed into their breasts. Josh added a level of difficulty when he put a penny on top of her slide, and had her dry fire without making the penny fall off. After about 10 tries, she got it right, and Josh made her do 10 in a row without the penny falling off. Finally he handed her a loaded magazine, and had her insert it into the well, pull the slide back, and let it fly forward. He told her the gun was now ready to fire with a live round in the chamber. She started firing at the target 15 feet away, and he slowly backed up the target as she got better. By that afternoon, she was shooting kill zone shots at 15 yards, and getting most of the rounds in the black at 25 yards. It wasn't great, but Josh knew that they didn't have another day, because the plane would be waiting to fly her parents back to Australia tomorrow, and he'd have to plan a route to get the SuperGoose from Allakaket to Australia.

After talking with his Dad, Josh learned that the Super Goose's maximum range was right around 2,000 nautical miles at 280 knots. If he kicked it up to 300 knots, the range dropped to 1800nm, on down to 1200nm at 350 knots, which was it's maximum recommended straight and level speed. The plane could climb at 2,500 feet per minute lightly loaded, with a max emergency climb rate of 3,000 feet per minute for short periods, since it could easily induce a stall and a crash. Took his calculator and started figuring out a safe route to get home. He checked the great circle route from Anchorage to Honolulu, and it was right at the SuperGoose's maximum range at 2400 nautical miles. He called his Dad in, who called the Aircraft mechanic, who told him they could install a fuel bladder in the cargo compartment, since it was just the 2 of them, and put all their junk in the passenger compartment. 500 gallons of fuel would just about double their range, and just about equal their max cargo capacity with a full load of passengers (8). If they deducted the weight of the passengers (1600 pounds) they could theoretically carry 1600 pounds in the passenger cabin, and still be safe for the long over-water hops. The extra weight of the fuel and cargo would reduce the efficiency of the plane, but they'd still get an additional 1500 miles or so, giving them an ample emergency reserve. They wouldn't need to refill the bladder for the shorter hops, but they'd have it for the longer ones. All the airports serviced jets so they should have plenty of jet fuel, and the Super Goose wasn't picky about what kind of jet fuel it burned.

With that out of the way, Josh called Dan up at the FAA office to file the international flight plan. He almost told Josh he couldn't do it, until Josh told him the Aircraft mechanic was installing a 500 gallon fuel bladder in the cargo area instead of the 3,500 pounds of cargo they could haul. Jet fuel weighed right around 6 pounds per gallon, so it was an even trade, since the bladders didn't weigh that much. Dan said he'd get back to him, and asked Josh when he was planning on leaving. He said they'd be out of there at first light, since that first leg was over 10 hours in the air. Meanwhile, Ron was making a hotel reservation for Josh and Sheila, and

booked a nice hotel near the Honolulu International airport. He checked the internet, located the Captain Cook Hotel on Christmas Island (Kiritimati), and booked a room for the next night, and arranged refueling. They had plenty of jet fuel available since a 737 from Honolulu landed there once a week. Ron sent them a PO for 1200 gallons of Jet A, and they agreed to bill Allakaket Airlines. He sent an e-mail to the Airport Manager at Honolulu International, who agreed to take an Allakaket Airlines PO for jet fuel there as well. Next Ron checked out the airport at Tahiti, and booked a room at the Intercontinental Beachcomber Resort Tahiti. Thinking they might want a breather, he made it for 2 nights. Papeete was a major tourist location, so he had no problem securing 1200 gallons of Jet fuel, and they took his Allakaket Airlines Purchase Order as well. Their next stop on Josh's routing was Nadi International Airport in Fiji. That was the second-longest leg of the trip at 1885 nautical miles, so he booked a room for the night, and secured 1200 gallons of Jet A with an Allakaket Airlines purchase order. From Fiji, they now had the range to fly directly to Brisbane Australia, skipping the stop in New Caledonia if they wanted, since the whole Fiji/Brisbane leg was only 1668 nautical miles. He talked to Josh, who agreed they could fly direct to Brisbane from there, and save a stop, he just wanted to make sure New Caledonia stayed in his Navigation Computer in case they had a problem. If everything went well, they'd just overfly it and land in Australia.

Ron almost panicked when he realized they'd need visas for each country, and made a couple of calls. He found out that unless they were staying for more than a day or two, they only needed a simple tourist visa since they were "just passing through", so he made arrangements for both of them for visas in all the little islands. Since the islands had once been American or British territories, the visas were a formality, and were issued over the internet. Ron reminded Josh to bring a copy of their marriage license and birth certificates just in case. Josh still had a valid passport as did Sheila. Thinking quickly, he had Gene type an official looking letter stating that Josh was on a TDY assignment to Australia, and was authorized to fly his personal plane. Gene knew what was going on, and realized it was just a scam to get past a nosy customs official on these small Pacific Islands. Gene went into full "Bureaucratic BS" mode, and wrote a whopper of a letter, citing non-existent Special Forces projects and DOD directives. Between the letter, and the contractor letter he got, it should intimidate the heck out of any nosy customs officials. Gene printed a hard copy on some of his old office stationery, and drove it over to Ron's house. Gene showed Josh the letter, and explained what they were trying to do. Most Pacific Island Nations don't like people to import full-auto weapons into their country, but if they realized that he was part of a Top-Secret DOD project in Australia, and he was just passing through, it might work. Josh had to laugh, then Gene made him swear he'd only use the letter if he got in a jamb, because if they checked, Gene could get in a whole bunch of trouble.

Chapter 76 - A Wing and a Prayer

They went to bed early that afternoon, since they had to be up before 0500 to be in the air at first light at 0600. Sheila and Josh went to sleep as soon as they hit the sheets since they knew they had a long couple of days ahead. Ron and Nancy got up early the next morning to make sure they were up to see Josh and Sheila off. The 6 of them had an early breakfast, and the truck was already loaded, so they said goodbye to everyone there. Josh had made arrangements to fly into Elmendorf and refuel there while he surrendered his military gear. The Supply Sergeant knew Josh was in a hurry, so he just signed for the bags of gear that Josh handed him. They quickly taxied to the fuel pumps and topped off the tanks, then called for permission to take off. Since there was no one around that time of the day, they were given immediate clearance, and were airborne for Honolulu at 0800 local. Josh slowly climbed to his assigned altitude and set the autopilot to maintain an airspeed of 280 knots. He barely noticed the fuel bladder, but was glad he had the extra fuel, because he was bucking a 10-knot headwind, and wouldn't have made it without it. The Aircraft mechanic had installed the 500-gallon bladder, and secured it so it wouldn't move, and plumbed it into the fuel system. They had stored all their baggage and gifts in the passenger compartment, and there was barely enough room for everything, so they wouldn't be joining the Mile High club on this trip. The mechanic had thoughtfully installed a porta-potty and a tarp for privacy, because there was no way they could hold it for 10 hours. They had brought a pile of books, and passed the time reading, listening to music on Josh's portable CD player, or talking.

They found out they had even more in common than they thought before. Sheila wanted at least 2 and maybe 4 kids, which was OK with Josh. She surprised Josh when she said she didn't want to live the rest of her life in Australia, and wanted to move to the US. She said she loved Alaska, and wanted to move back there sometime. Josh said he'd be happy anywhere, as long as she was with him. That called for a kiss, so Sheila gave Josh a very affectionate kiss. Ron had printed out their itinerary last night, including which hotels they were staying at, and their reservation numbers. Josh was confused by all the PO numbers for fuel, but decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth, he was sure his Dad would write it off somehow. Josh was wondering how his Dad had managed to get all the visas and everything done so quickly, then he remembered the old quote "Nice to have low friends in High places." and guessed that Ron had some help. He read the letter Gene wrote and laughed. He hoped the Customs inspectors in these small pacific island countries weren't too diligent, and were impressed by official-looking documents. Since they were just passing through, he didn't think there would be any problems. Josh remembered his dad handing him something last night before he went to bed. It was a money belt with 20 Canadian maple leafs. Ron explained that sometimes you could use a gold coin to buy yourself out of deep trouble if you used it properly. Josh thought it was a good idea, and decided to always carry a money belt from now on. Sheila felt funny putting on her IWB holster that morning, but Josh told her that it didn't do her too much good in the night stand. For now, he told her that she could get by with 2 spare magazines, and if they got permits in Australia, she could work her way up to 4. She wondered why anyone would need 4

magazines, so Josh told her Bear's story, and told her that he'd almost run out of ammunition on ops before, and an empty gun was a very expensive club.

A little over 10 hours later, they landed at Honolulu international, taxied to the fuel pumps, filled every tank they had including the bladder as full as they could get, then taxied to the General Aviation parking lot, then parked and locked the plane. The airport's security was pretty good, but he didn't want anyone to break into their plane. They caught a cab at the taxi stand, and had him drop them off at their hotel, which turned out to be within walking distance, but they decided they'd take a cab back so they wouldn't have to walk back. Josh paid the cabby and gave him a good tip, and asked if he could take them back to the airport at 0700 tomorrow morning, they had a long trip ahead of them. He said he'd be right were he dropped them off at 0700 tomorrow, and Josh thanked him then got out of the cab. He gave the registration number and his American Express card to the clerk, and since they were only staying 1 night and leaving early the next morning, she charged the card and he signed the receipt since they didn't need the phone or room service. She handed them their electronic passkey, and they went into their room, dropped their bags, then after using the bathroom, walked down to the diner and ate. After dinner, they went back up to their room, showered and went to sleep, but not before they fooled around a while. Josh's alarm went off at 0600, and he got up, used the bathroom, got packed and dressed, then they went down for an early breakfast, then went back into their room to retrieve their bags and dropped the key off on their way out of the lobby. Just like he said, the cabby was waiting right at the door at 0700. He dropped them off right in front of the General Aviation terminal, and they walked out to where their plane was parked, checked it out and did a walk around, then opened it up and got inside.

Josh used the APU to start the turbines, then Sheila helped him with the pre-flight checklist. Once the turbines were in the green, Josh bumped them from idle to taxi, and called the tower for permission to take off. The tower said they were #3 for take-off, and it would be a couple of minutes. When he got to the end of the runway, he called again, and the tower said he was clear to take off. He slowly climbed to altitude and turned southwest to Christmas Island (Kiritimati), which was about 1200 nautical miles away. At 280 knots, they'd be there in a little over 4 hours. This time, Josh set the switches to burn off the fuel stored in the bladder first, so he could land as light as possible in case the runway at Christmas Island was rough. While they were flying, Josh talked Sheila through the operations of the SuperGoose, and told her that he wanted to get her type rated in the Goose as soon as possible. Sheila thought this was really nice of Josh, and gave him another kiss. 4 hours later, they landed at Christmas Island, and ran into their first snag, in the form of a Customs Official that decided to give them a hard time. Josh explained he was a United States Navy SEAL en route to Australia with his new wife on temporary duty to a classified project. He showed the official his Military ID, and the letter from Barrett, and the official was mollified. Josh explained they were only staying overnight, and flying on to Australia the next morning, and presented their passports. He inspected their passports and visas, then grudgingly stamped them. Once they were in the taxi, Josh breathed a sigh of relief.

The cabby took them to the Captain Hook Hotel, which turned out to be the only hotel on the island with electricity and running water all day long. They were so close to equator that as soon as they got into their room, they turned the air conditioning on high and left it on. The shower was large enough to take a shower together so they did, then they laid down on the bed for a while. Finally they got up and looked for a place to eat dinner. The hotel clerk said there was a nice restaurant across the street that took credit cards. The food was simple but spicy, and consisted mostly of fish and rice. When they were done eating they went back to their room, took another shower and went to sleep. They got up at 0600 the next morning, caught a cab to the airport, filled the tanks of the plane, including the bladder, even though they were only going 1200 miles. They were flying to Tahiti, and were looking forward to spending 2 days there as a mini-honeymoon. They had reserved the honeymoon suite since it was available. They wanted to go diving, but knew better than to dive then fly in an unpressurized aircraft, which was a sure way to get the bends.

On their way to Tahiti, Sheila was reading something about Polynesian women going topless in Tahiti. She mentioned it to Josh, who quipped “If you go topless, it will probably start a riot, so I wouldn’t. But if you really feel like it, you can take your top off while we’re flying, as long as the autopilot’s engaged so we don’t crash!”

“You Dirty Old Man!”

“Who you calling OLD?”

Sheila made sure the autopilot was engaged, and started unbuttoning her blouse. Fascinated, Josh never thought to tell her to stop, and 2 minutes later she was flying topless. Good thing they weren’t flying formation with anyone, or they might have a heart attack. They flew like that for hours, until Josh noticed Sheila’s breasts starting to turn pink. “Dear, you might want to cover up, you’re starting to burn.” Reluctantly, Sheila put her blouse back on, but left her bra off. She asked Josh to remind her to put it back on before they landed. Josh started giggling about the image of his wife jiggling, and old men dropping dead from the excitement. She said “What’s so funny?”

“It’s a guy thing, I was imagining you walking around braless, giving all the old men heart attacks!”

“Good thing you’re a Special Forces Medical Technician, and a Paramedic!”

“Yeah, but I can only do CPR on one old fart at a time.”

“Never thought of that!”

“Having you give CPR to an old man while you were braless would be self-defeating - every time he woke up, he’d pass out from the excitement!”

Later, Sheila said that she needed to put something on her breasts, and Josh suggested Aloe vera Gel. She asked if he could put it on, and he grinned a lecherous grin. “On second thought, maybe I should put it on, there’s not enough room here to finish what we started.”

“You could always take a rain check.”

“I’d probably attack you right as we got off the plane, and get ourselves arrested - not a good idea! How about if I let you re-apply it in the hotel room?”

“Works for me!”

Josh was starting to get seriously aroused, so he changed the subject, and picked up a paperback and turned on the CD to a Jazz group he liked. Later, he turned up the cabin air conditioning, it was getting warm in the cockpit.

Several hours later, they landed in Papeete Tahiti, and the only thing Josh could think about was getting to the hotel as fast as possible. The Customs officer recognized the look on numerous newlywed’s faces, and got them through customs as quickly as possible. The cab got them quickly to the hotel, and Sheila was glad Ron had booked the Honeymoon suite at the Intercontinental Beachcomber Resort Tahiti for 2 nights, because she was pretty sure they wouldn’t get out of the room for the first day, and maybe the second.

Sheila was more sunburned than she realized, which meant that Josh had to re-apply the aloe vera gel frequently, which resulted in them staying inside their whole 2-day stay. All in all, it was a good trade-off in Sheila’s opinion. She realized she had better plan on having at least 4 kids if they kept this up. That evening, they went to dinner, and did an early check-out since they wanted to be airborne by 0600, since the next leg to Fiji was over 1800nm long. At 280 knots, it would be a long flight. Josh called the airport, and asked that the plane be filled, including the fuel bladder in the baggage compartment and the 50-gallon APU tank, and to make sure they got them as full as possible, since he had a long over-water flight. When they got to the airport the next morning, the airport manager handed him a receipt for 750 gallons of Jet Fuel A, and a plane washing, since the plane was covered with salt spray. Josh appreciated the wash, since it could add 10 knots to his speed at the same power setting, and the plane was starting to look kind of grey. Josh checked the fuel tanks, and they were full to the caps, and the bladder was as full as he had seen it. The airport manager had taken his instruction literally. He was glad they had a long runway here, because as heavily loaded as he was, and as hot as it was even at 0600, he knew he was going to need all of it to get airborne. Josh and Sheila finished the walk-around, climbed aboard, and started the turbines, then finished the pre-flight checks. Once the turbines were in the green, Josh moved the throttles to taxi, and called the tower for permission to take off. That early in the morning, there wasn’t any air traffic in the air or on the runways, so he told him he was clear to take off as soon as he reached the runway. Sheila programmed the navigation system for the next airport, NAN @ 17.45.17S 177.26.37E, and double checked the GPS coordinates, which were more precise. They had plenty of fuel, but

they didn't want to get lost out here, so they were practically paranoid about double checking the navigation system. When she finished programming it, Josh double checked her. During this flight, they always double-checked each other, especially with the navigation system. Hawaii was a pretty big island and hard to miss, but they could miss Fiji from the air.

The flight to Fiji was long and boring. Josh estimated 7 hours at their current speed to arrive at Fiji, and they were already tired. He decided to trust the autopilot, set an alarm for 6 hours, and told Sheila he was taking a nap. She was exhausted too, and they were both soon fast asleep. The alarm went off 6 hours later, and Josh checked the Nav display, and they were 45 minutes out of Fiji, and needed to contact the tower since they were almost to Fijian territorial waters.

"Allakaket Airlines calling Fiji Control."

"Go Ahead Allakaket."

"Approaching Fijian waters, request permission to enter and land at Nadi International to refuel and rest overnight."

"Wait One."

"Allakaket, we have your flight plan on file, proceed according to plan, and contact Nadi after you're finished with us."

"Roger, Wilco. Allakaket out."

Josh switched frequencies to Nadi Control

"Nadi, this is Allakaket Airlines requesting permission to land and landing instructions."

"Allakaket, this is Nadi, come right to 360 and reduce altitude to 5,000 feet and expedite."

"Roger Nadi."

Josh put the plane into a steep right bank, and 2 minutes later, he was on heading 360 at 5,000 MSL.

"Thanks Allakaket, we had a 737 that just took off on a collision course. I wish those SOB's that publish the inter-island charts would note the altitude restrictions for incoming flights from the east."

"Copy tower, the 737 just passed well overhead. Thanks. Any further instructions."

"Maintain heading and altitude until over outer marker, then turn left to line up with 27W,

which is our only active runway. There are no nearby obstructions, and you're clear to land. Minutes later, he called Nadi and said "Allakaket on Final" and landed minutes later. They were met by a plane handler who parked the plane, and got a \$5 tip from Josh. They grabbed their carry-on bags and walked to the Customs office. Since they were just staying overnight with nothing to declare, they basically walked through customs. The cab took them to hotel he recommended, and they unpacked and fell right to sleep. The next morning they pigged out since they hadn't eaten hardly anything for 12 hours, then caught a cab to the airport, refueled and did a quick walk around, then started the turbines and finished the pre-flight checklist. Next stop Brisbane Australia.

2 hours later, Josh practically jumped out of his pilots seat, ran as fast as he could to the porta-potty, and barely got his pants down before the local Fijian food made a sudden and violent exit. No sooner did he get cleaned up and buttoned up, when Sheila practically flattened him in her haste to make it to the porta-potty. Josh took out the first aid kit, and gave each of them a healthy dose of Imodium, and told Sheila only to drink their stored filtered water from now on, and they had plenty of safe food aboard. Sheila told him that unless they stopped in new Caledonia, it shouldn't be a problem, since Brisbane was a major town. Josh just hoped he lived that long. A little over 3 hours later, he had Sheila call the Brisbane tower, figuring the Australian Accent might fool them into thinking it was a domestic flight, and it worked. They landed, emptied the porta-potty, refueled and took off bound for Sydney. About 1 hour later, Sheila called her friend Nick at the RAAF base in Sydney, and he got them permission to land, especially when she said they were flying a SuperGoose. They landed at the RAAF base, and Nick met them just off the flight line with his Hummer, and guided them to an out-of-the way parking spot, and helped them unload. Once they had their personal stuff in his Hummer, he called for a mechanic and an assistant to take the fuel bladder out. Nick wanted a ride in the worst way, but Josh asked Nick if they could do it tomorrow, they were dog tired, and their stomachs were still bugging them.

Nick called his CO, and drove them to his house, and showed them to their room. The room was already furnished, so they unpacked, drank some water from his filtered supply. He didn't need the filter, but he hadn't gotten sick all his life. Nick said he had to get back to work, and to help themselves. They ate some fruit just to get some food in their stomachs, took a shower and went to bed.

Chapter 77 - Back in the Saddle

Nick came home that evening, and they were still asleep, so when they got up the next morning, Sheila made breakfast for the 3 of them, and Nick (Commander Nicholas Klaus RAAF) told Josh he had a very interesting conversation with his Wing Commander (Gen. Karl Ratliff, RAAF) about the Super Goose. The gist of it was that if Josh had the time, they'd both like to take a familiarization ride in it, since the RAAF had been trying to buy them ever since Northrop/Grumman started building them. Josh said that he'd love to, so after breakfast Nick drove Josh to his RAAF base, and right up to his WC's office. Once they were admitted, Nick saluted, and Josh stood at attention, since he was out of uniform. Once Gen. Ratliff finished whatever paperwork he was working on, he looked up, and returned the salute.

"At ease. Mr. Williams, Commander Klaus tells me you actually own a SuperGoose, and it's parked on base. With your permission, I'd like to take a look at it, and hopefully we can go for a familiarization ride."

"I'd love to. Do you have any small bodies of water nearby, a large pond or small lake that I can demonstrate the aircraft's STOL capabilities?"

The general pulled out a chart showing a nearby reservoir that was right between HelpMeJack lake and the lake at Allakaket. Best news was it had only 50 foot obstructions within 1/4 mile. It would be a walk in the park for Josh to land and take off there. He explained to the General that the aircraft was still configured for long-distance ferrying, and needed a jump seat and a headset multiplexer installed if the 3 of them wanted to be in the cockpit. General Ratliff lifted a phone, and asked that a Mechanic be sent to where the SuperGoose was parked, with a multiplexer and a jump seat. Josh took that as a Yes, and they all got into Nick's Hummer and drove to the plane. Nick was in love, and General Ratliff was really impressed. Even after flying halfway across the Pacific island hopping, the plane was still beautiful. Josh could tell that someone had cleaned and detailed it, and guessed Nick was behind that. Josh climbed aboard, flipped a couple of switches, and lowered the rear hatch and air stairs for the General to get a better look.

"Bloody Hell, you could just about fit a Jeep in here!"

"Yes Sir, the SEALs were looking at it as well, since you could fit at least 1 and maybe 2 RHIB boats, and 2 teams of SEALs aboard with a little crowding, or 1 complete team with their gear and the boat. In Allakaket, one of my friends builds a VW dunebuggy conversion for driving on snow called the Snow Bug, and it fits easily with room to spare, and the tail ramp is structured to act as an actual loading ramp. The ramp can be deployed on land or water, and has a feedback system that stops the ramp's downward travel when enough resistance is reached to keep the ramp from getting damaged."

“What are these things?”

The General was pointing to the Oxygen hookups, and Josh explained the aircraft was also configured for Medevac in the Convertible setup. He had 8 VIP seats stowed somewhere to convert it to a passenger aircraft. All Allakaket Airlines Pilots were certified Paramedics in Alaska. The general asked why, and Josh explained that Alaska was about as remote as The Northern Territories, and the only way to get help to someone who was sick or injured was to fly to them and fly them out. They had a couple of Sikorsky helicopters, but they were relatively slow and had short legs. With a normal fuel load, he had just over 2,000nm of range at 280 knots, or if he kicked it up to 300 knots, the range dropped to 1800nm, on down to 1200nm at 350 knots, which was it's maximum recommended straight and level speed. The plane could climb at 2,500 feet per minute lightly loaded, with a max emergency climb rate of 3,000 feet per minute for short periods, since it could easily induce a stall and a crash. With the fully reversible turboprops, the plane had an amazing STOL capability, and it could land on lakes even smaller and with higher and closer obstructions than the reservoir. Josh described the size and obstructions of HelpMeJack lake, and the General looked at him like he was crazy. He realized that the only way to find out was to get aboard and find out. Right then the mechanic finished installing the removable jump seat and multiplexer, so they climbed aboard. Josh talked them through the preflight checklist, and started the turbines using the on-board APU. As soon as the turbines were in the green, the General received clearance for a demonstration flight, and made sure the airspace around the plane was clear. Josh took his hint, and configured the plane for a max-performance take-off. Once he was at the end of the runway, he pushed the throttles to 100%, held the brakes for a second, then released them and as soon as the airspeed indicator hit 85 knots, he hauled back on the yoke until they were climbing at 2500 feet per minute. Josh held the climb until they were at 5,000 feet, then he turned toward the reservoir. Once he was right where he wanted to be, he performed a wing-over, bottomed out at 500AGL, and cranked madly on the flaps until he was at 500 feet AGL at 80 knots. Once he cleared the rise, he further reduced throttle, and they floated right on down to the lake. As soon as they were down, he flipped the pitch reverse switch, and throttled up to 30% throttle. They stopped on a dime, floating there in the middle of the lake. The General had a glassy-eyed stare, and Nick was grinning from ear to ear. Finally the General said “I knew the plane had STOL capabilities, but I never knew it could do that!”

“General, in parts of Alaska, we have to land planes on what you would consider postage stamps, so we had to develop techniques as bush pilots to land on small lakes.”

“Josh, I just got word from Grumman that they are shipping our initial order of 200 Super Goose aircraft this week. I wanted to hire you as a Consultant and trainer to teach our IP's how to do what you just did. It doesn't do us a lot of good to have a plane with this capability, and not have the pilots trained to do it. We could pay you say \$100,000 per year as a consultant plus expenses. I ran your background, and I found out you just resigned from the SEALS.”

“Sir, what can I say, I just lost my Team Leader and friend to a training accident caused by the

Fat Cats in DC not budgeting enough funds to replace older obsolete training aircraft. According to my CO, the plane should have been cut up for scrap years ago, but it was all they had. A couple of years ago, my swim buddy got shot through the leg because someone in DC couldn't keep their lips zipped, and compromised our mission. We were lucky to get out with only 1 SEAL wounded. We were up against FARC guerillas, and if they'd had the manpower, I might not be here. I have a trust fund worth \$25 Million, and I just got married in Alaska to a beautiful Australian woman who is finishing her doctorate in Marine Biology at the UNSW, so we came back here."

"That would be Sheila Bannon, Nick told me all about it. Anyway, sounds like you've got an interesting skill set. From what I read you could out-shoot most of my snipers, and your Dad was working on a project with Barrett firearms. Do you know anything about that?"

"Sir, I have a letter right here if you wanted to read it."

Josh handed the general the letter.

"This sounds to me like you have the rifle nearby. Mind if I take a look at it?"

"It's over at Nick's house if you don't mind."

"Ok, let's get this crate back to the barn and get a look at your new toy."

They landed at the RAAF base, and once Josh was parked, they shut down and went to Nick's Hummer, which someone had thoughtfully added the General's flags to, so he could ride in style. Josh jumped in back, and they drove to Nick's house. Sheila was sitting there doing her homework when they came in. She jumped up and walked over to Nick and the General. Josh made the introductions, and she shook the General's hand, then went back to her studies. Nick and Josh manhandled a huge crate marked US Government Property onto the dining room table, and opened it. Inside was a Pelican case containing the M -200, and a case of Black Hills BMG 50 Match ammo. They opened the Pelican case, and the General got really interested.

"We'd heard about the M -200, and wanted to buy some, but this is the first one I've seen."

Sheila overheard them and said with a note of pride in her voice, "Just last week Josh here shot a 5-inch 5-shot group at 1,000 yards with it at Bear's Survival School range in Alaska." The General got REALLY interested, no one shot 5-inch groups at 1,000 yards with any rifle in the RDF inventory including their Barrett M82A1. Josh explained the program his Dad and Gene worked on for all those years. It was hopefully not classified any more, and the general realized that they had a real asset here, and he needed to take care of him and keep him in Australia as long as possible to work with the RDF. He'd heard about the Robo-gun project, and hoped Parliament would let them buy some of the LAV-25's equipped with the new Robo-gun, which was supposed to be sniper accurate out past a mile. The General came out of his reverie and

told Josh that the RDF could really use the help, and he wanted to make it worth Josh's time. Not only with the SuperGoose, but the M -200 if they could buy some, and maybe with the Robo-gun equipped LAV-25. Josh said he had some problems, and he might be able to help. He told him about the time they got mugged at Observatory Hill Park, and the totally anti-gun attitude of the local politicians. He showed the general his Federal CCW, and explained that it would allow him to legally carry concealed anywhere in the US, and he wanted something comparable that was good all over Australia, since he'd probably have to travel, and he wanted one for Sheila too. General Ratliff knew he could take care of that, and asked Josh if he got them both concealed carry permits good anywhere in Australia, and the consulting contract for say \$250,000 per year plus expenses, would he be willing to stay there for at least 5 years?

Josh excused himself, saying he needed to ask Sheila, who gave him a big kiss and told him to go for it, then he walked back into the room, wiping lipstick off his face.

"I take it Sheila approves."

"General, if you can come through with the permits, including paperwork for any military hardware I have including the rifle, and a consulting contract for \$250,000 per year plus expenses, you've got a deal!"

"What military hardware?"

"General, I used to be a SEAL, and let's leave it at that."

"Ok, I'll get my aide started on the paperwork. For organizational purposes, Commander Klaus will be the project manager, if that's ok with you."

Josh thought he could trust Nick, and he seemed OK for an Aussie, so he said OK.

Nick drove the General back to the base, and 2 days later, he gave Josh and Sheila some very valuable and rare permits that allowed them to carry any weapons, including Military hardware concealed anywhere in the Commonwealth of Australia. It identified them as being consultants on a classified RDF project as a cover. Josh thought that it was really neat when you had people with connections like that. He called his Dad and said they were staying in Australia for a while, and told him about the Consulting contract. Ron told him they were going to ship his Hummer and all the parts and manuals they'd need to maintain the SuperGoose to Australia on a container ship that should be arriving in Sydney Harbor in a month or so. Josh asked him to ship 2 M -25's with scopes, 20 magazines, and 5 cases of ammo as well, since their permits allowed ANY military hardware. Josh thought about that and added several other things to the list including cases of SS-109 ammo, Corbon 45acp 200gr JHP, and a couple more cases of .308 and 50-BMG match ammo. Ron said he'd take care of it, and told Josh he loved him right before he hung up. Josh said "Bye Dad" and heard a click in response.

Later that week Sheila's parents called up and asked if the two of them could fly to their Station for a family party that Saturday. Sheila checked with Josh, and they were available, so she said "sure". Jack said something about making sure to bring their rifles, so Sheila told Josh when they hung up. Josh assumed he meant all of them. Since he had the paperwork making it official, he brought the M - 25 and the M - 200 when they flew the SuperGoose there Saturday morning. 1200nm at 280 knots took a little over 4 hours so they landed around noon, and Sheila's dad Jack was there to pick them up. Good thing too, since the case carrying the M - 200 weighed a ton, and the 2 of them barely managed to get it into the pickup bed. The M -25 and the case of match ammo was light in comparison. When they arrived at the ranch, there were trucks and Land Cruisers parked all over the place. Josh guessed that the entire family showed up this time. Nellie greeted them at the door, and said that since they couldn't all fly to Alaska, they decided to have another reception/reunion for them when they got back, and this was the soonest they could get everyone together. When Josh told Jack and Nellie about the RDF consulting contract, and they'd be in Australia for at least the next 5 years, Nellie was overjoyed since Sheila had always been her "baby". Josh met so many people he lost track, and Sheila helped him out. Most of them were middle-aged with anywhere from 4-8 kids each.

Sheila explained that in the Outback everyone had large families since everyone needed to pitch in when there was work to do, like shearing the sheep, and culling the roos. Josh looked at her funny, and she explained that if they didn't keep the kangaroo populations down to size, they'd eat all the forage and starve anyway, but destroy the stations in the process, so each year they shot anywhere from 500-5,000 kangaroos on each station. Josh asked if they ate them or kept the skins. Sheila explained that they weren't very good eating, and their coats left a lot to be desired. Lately they had been donating the carcasses to the local aboriginal tribes, who would eat almost anything, and appreciated the meat and the skins, as long as they were fresh. They were going out to shoot roos tomorrow, and wanted to know if Josh wanted to come along. With the Springfield rifle, he could take a lot of them. He wondered what they'd say if he shot a kangaroo with the BMG-50 M - 200 at over 1,000 yards! Later that evening he asked Jack if he should bring the M -200, or if the M -25 would be enough. Jack said he wouldn't waste such a fine rifle shooting kangaroos, which he considered oversized rats, so Josh dropped it.

First thing the next morning, they drove out in their pickups and Jeeps. Josh brought the M -25 and left the M -200 at home. Sheila grabbed a Bushmaster HBAR AR-15 with a scope at Josh's advice. 2 hours later, they noticed a mob of thousands of red kangaroos all feeding. They set up their rifles, and Josh brought all 30 20-round magazines for his rifle, and Sheila brought 30 20-round mags as well. Josh concentrated on the biggest kangaroos over 300 yards out, and as soon as Jack started shooting, Josh was dropping kangaroos with 1 shot at over 300 yards at a rate of 1 every 5 seconds or better. When he ran out of ammo, the barrel was smoking hot, and he left the action open to cool. When they went out to collect the carcasses and saw the ones Josh shot, Jack commented that you didn't need to shoot the kangaroos in the head. Then he realized that Josh was making head shots on a kangaroo at 300-400 yards and dropping 10-12 of them per minute until his ammo ran out, and some of them were trying to get away!

He suddenly realized his son-in-law would make several professional kangaroo hunters look like amateurs. They waited for the bodies to bleed out, then piled the carcasses in a huge 6x6 diesel truck that took a load to a disposal site where the Aboriginal tribes collected the ones that were in better shape. Jack thought that they'd appreciate Josh's shooting, since they'd get pelts without holes in them. Later that evening after dinner, Jack broke out a jug of sipping whiskey and the men sat down to talk. The subject quickly turned to shooting, and Josh described growing up in a wilderness much like Australia, but much colder, to which Jack said "here, here!" He told them about hunting Caribou and Moose, and shooting the occasional grizzly bear. When he said that they had a pack of wolves sharing the area, Jack looked at him like he was nuts until Josh explained that once the wolves habituated to the humans, as long as they were both hunter-gatherers there was no conflict. The conflict started when Man started raising livestock, and the wolves saw the livestock as prey, which they normally were; so man had to use the domesticated cousins of the wolf to keep the wild wolves from their flocks, and that was when the problems started. Josh explained it was too flipping cold to raise livestock in Alaska, so there was no reason not to get along with the wolves. He told them about Oliver, Sam, and the other wolves they'd adopted over the years, and how domesticated dogs were genetically identical to a wild wolf, and were only a case of arrested development and inbreeding for selected traits. If you outbred dogs like German shepards and huskies, they quickly resembled their wild cousins.

When the men were through, Sheila came in to collect her husband. She was disappointed when he fell asleep right when she laid him in the bed. She got him undressed, and pulled the covers over them, then went to bed. The next morning, Josh woke up with a major hangover. Sheila was ready for it, and handed him a large glass of water and several aspirin. Half an hour later, Nellie called out that Breakfast was ready. Judging by the looks on his male relative's faces, he wasn't the only one suffering that morning. He couldn't understand how anyone with a hangover could eat a big breakfast, but after some tomato juice, his stomach settled right down, and he dug in as well. They sat around the rest of the day recuperating from the excesses of last night while the women cleaned up and talked. All of her sisters were either pregnant, had a baby on their hip, or were pregnant with a baby on their hip. Sheila hoped that she would soon settle down and start popping babies out one after another, but she knew her clock was ticking, and she would have to make a choice of her career or kids. With Josh around, she wanted it to be kids. Before she was totally dedicated to her career, now she wanted to be a mommy in the worst way, and stopped taking her Birth Control pills as soon as they were married. She didn't tell Josh, because she never told him she was on the Pill in the first place. They spent the rest of the afternoon socializing, and they had a large roast lamb for dinner with all the trimmings. Josh and Sheila excused themselves after dinner, since they wanted to get an early flight back, and Josh was exhausted ... at least he was when Sheila was through with him!

The next morning they got up in time for breakfast, packed their bags, and Jack drove them out to the plane. They refueled the plane from Jack's tank farm and flew home to Sydney.

Chapter 78 - The Ship comes in

Josh received a phone call a month later, his Hummer was in, and he had a container to pick up. Josh asked if they could deliver everything to Nick's house, and they said that local delivery was included in the cost, so he gave them Nick's address. Later that afternoon, the Hummer and a 40-foot shipping container showed up within minutes of each other. When he unlocked the container, Josh realized he'd need a huge storage facility to store all of it, since they needed the container back in 3 days or they'd charge him for the use of the container. He called Nick and explained the situation. He told Nick that he'd send some Airmen over with a six-by and a huge trailer, and a forklift to transfer the load. They'd help him unload the ammunition and stuff, then load the parts and manuals into the truck and trailer so they could store everything at an unused hangar on the RAAF base, which was the same hangar his SuperGoose was currently parked in, so everything would be together. The next day, a 6x6 showed up at Nick's place with 4 of the biggest airmen Josh had ever seen. They loaded the crates of ammunition and stuff into Nick's huge garage, then transferred the pallets of parts into the 6x6 and the trailer, then drove off.

Josh was curious what was in the boxes stamped US Government Property. He pried the first one open, and there was a note from Gene saying he included some surprises that he didn't order, and found 4 Mini-Uzis just like his with 10 30+ round magazines each including the suppressor and 5 cases of Corbon 200gr JHP ammo. Josh liked the way Gene thought, and guessed that the Supply sergeant at MacDill unloaded the rest of his Uzi's and shipped them to Gene years ago, because they were still in their original packaging and grease. In the next box was 4 Springfield Armory M - 25's with the tactical BDC scopes, 50 20-round magazines, and 10 cases of Black Hills Match Ammo, all with the same lot number. The next case held 2 more SOPMOD M - 4 kits, 10 cases of SS-109 ammo, and 10 cases of 40mm grenades. The final case was the heaviest of all, and contained another M - 200 and 10 cases of BMG-50 Match ammo. Josh hoped he never had to move this stuff again, because the cases weighed a ton! He walked inside Nick's house, and asked Sheila if she could come down to the garage for a minute, he had a surprise for her. He showed her all the stuff his dad shipped them, and her eyes fixated on the M -200. She'd always wanted to shoot one, and Josh told her that rifle was her's to keep. She squealed like a little girl, hugged the stuffing out of him, and kissed him as hard as he could remember. He told her they could fly to her dad's station and shoot their M - 200's that weekend if she didn't have anything else to do. She saw the M - 25's and suggested they bring those too. She suggested giving 1 each to her mom and dad, and 3 cases of the match ammo. When she saw the Uzis, she asked what the heck they were for. Josh said that he wanted her to store her Land Cruiser, since he wanted to buy her a Hummer H1 just like his. He was going to get them both ballistically armored, and have a false bed put in the back to store their bug-out kits including the M -4 SOPMOD kits. She gave him another kiss, and went back to her studies.

Josh walked inside the house, logged onto the internet, located a HUMMER dealer, ordered a brand-new 2004 H-1 Hummer with the 6.5 liter Cummins turbo-diesel, and had them deliver it. He called Nick, and he suggested a body shop that did ballistic armoring for VIP vehicles, and had done dozens of Hummers. He called them, talked to the owner, and drove his old Hummer to the shop after getting directions. He told the owner what he needed, and the owner said that much armor, including a full-length skid plate backed by Kevlar armor, ballistic panels inside the doors and the rest of the body, bullet resistant windows, upgraded front and rear bumpers with push bars and side nerf bars weighed enough that he should install the full Banks kit in his diesel engine, that would bump the horsepower from 205 to almost 300hp, and the torque from 440 ft-lb to almost 600ft-lb. He said that the propane injection kit, and the dual fuel tank setup came with the kit. Josh said he also needed a large hidden compartment behind the back seat running the full width and length of the back, and at least 6 inches deep, with a high-security lock. The whole installation needed to look stock. The owner suggested he tint the windows as dark as the law allowed, to prevent anyone from getting a good look inside, and he'd install sliding gun ports into the doors. He quoted Josh between \$100 and \$150 thousand to do everything, and Josh asked him what the price would be if he did 2 Hummers at once, since he was buying his wife a brand-new 2004 H-1 Hummer. He said the price for both would be substantially less, since the 2004 Hummer had a better turbocharger, so the kit was cheaper. He'd charge him \$220 thousand for both, cash. Josh asked if he'd take a check, and when he said he would, he wrote a check for \$220 thousand dollars without batting an eye and handed it to the owner. He told Josh to bring both vehicles over first thing tomorrow, and it would take about a week to install everything. Josh called the Hummer dealer, and asked them to deliver the vehicle to the body shop instead.

The next day, he drove his Hummer to the body shop, and they were already working on Sheila's vehicle. He got a ride back home, and started putting things together for their trip that Saturday to her parent's station. He called Nick at work, and asked him if they could have his SuperGoose fueled and ready at 0800 Saturday morning, and if they could use his Hummer to transport some equipment to the RAAF field they were bringing with them to her parent's station. Nick agreed to drive them over there, since he needed his Hummer for later that morning. The next day, Nick drove them to the hangar, and helped load the SuperGoose, then shook Josh's hand and gave Sheila a hug, and they were off to her parent's house.

4 hours later, they arrived at her parent's station. This time Jack brought his big diesel F-350 and some help. The ranch hands made quick work of loading the rifles and ammo in the bed of the truck. Josh wasn't worried, since the Pelican case was designed for rough handling. When they got to Jack's ranch house, Josh told Jack he had a present for him and Nellie, and handed him 2 cases containing a scoped M - 25 each, and 3 cases of .308 Match ammo. Jack wasn't the hugging type, but Nellie made up for him. Jack knew how much the M -25 cost, he'd looked one up on the Internet when they got home, and thought he couldn't afford one. He told Josh that was too big of a gift to give them. Josh said that he shouldn't worry about it, he had plenty of money where that came from, and he knew how much they wanted one. He asked Jack how big his Jet fuel tank was, and he said he had a 10,000 gallon tank. Josh suggested he'd help him

afford doubling it, because if they wanted to visit, he'd need to fill up at the station before flying back, and if he were flying anywhere North or Northwest of Sydney, this would be a good stopping place to fuel up, and said that he'd help Jack buy the bigger tank, and fill it full of fuel. Jack said they were buying JP-5, since it stored longer than Jet Fuel A, and was about the same price. Josh mentioned that he'd talk to Nick at the RAAF base, and see if they could get a bigger tank, and a better price for the larger deliveries, since a KC-130 could haul 10,000 gallons at once with enough fuel to fly the round trip to Sydney. Jack pointed out that they had regular tanker truck deliveries, and didn't need to use a KC-130. Josh laughed, saying that he was still thinking how they did stuff in Alaska, where there weren't many roads.

Jack said he'd love to have 20,000 gallons of jet fuel on hand, and he thought about increasing his diesel tanks while he was at it. He only stored 1,000 gallons of stabilized diesel for the station. Josh asked him to check if they could truck in another 10,000 gallon jet fuel tank, and another 1,000 gallon tank of diesel, and he'd pay for it. All they had to do was reimburse Josh for the fuel they used, and let him know when the tank got below half full. He called his Dad, and Ron told him to use the Allakaket Airlines purchase orders for fuel, so he could get better pricing, since they still owned the SuperGoose for tax purposes. Josh didn't give a rip who owned his plane, as long as he got to fly it. He'd already guessed that his Dad had made the same arrangements he'd made with Jake and Ralph, since maintaining the planes was expensive, and it would be a write-off for Allakaket Airlines. He told Jack what his dad had said, and knew that Ron could get much better pricing billing the fuel to Allakaket, and paying them, instead of buying it and paying retail or better himself. He gave Josh the number of his fuel distributor, and after Josh talked to him and indicated just how much fuel he'd use during a year, he checked and realized Allakaket Airlines was a major feeder airline for Alaska Airlines, which had a contract with their parent company, so he offered Josh 20% over wholesale pricing for 10,000 gallons of JP-5 and 1,000 gallons of stabilized diesel, and cost on the tanks and installation. Josh gave him a verbal PO, and said that he could e-mail the original if they would give him their e-mail address. Josh e-mailed the address and billing information including pricing to his dad, and asked him to e-mail a Purchase Order back to the fuel distributor, and to start an account for him so they could keep track of the fuel delivered to Jack's station. Ron took care of the details, and opened an account for the Outback Station under Allakaket Airlines in the billing system, with a note that the account would be reimbursed by Jack Bannon for personal use of fuel.

With that out of the way, they drove to their "shooting range" and spent the rest of the afternoon shooting. Josh taught Sheila how to shoot the M - 25 first, got her zero established, then once she was shooting small groups at the 600 yard line, switched her to her new M - 200, and set her up on the 600 yard line to get a zero. After 5 shots, he had her make a scope correction, then fire 5 more. Satisfied with her zero, and her group size, he moved her to the 1,000 yard range, and spent the rest of the day getting her group size under 10 inches. Her last group right before it got dark measured 9.5 inches, which was great for someone who had never shot that rifle before. Jack and Nellie were shooting 10-inch groups on the 600-yard line with their new rifles, and Josh promised their groups would get smaller with practice, as long as they shot the same

way every time.

Later that evening, a truck drove up to the front of the house, and 2 aborigines got out. Jack immediately recognized them as the eldest and 2nd son of the tribal chief of the closest aboriginal tribe. He had met them before, and they were very polite, proper, and British when they wanted to be. They shook Jack's hand when he stepped out on the porch to meet them, and they asked Jack if he knew about the hunter who had shot all the kangaroos through the head.

"You must mean my Son-in-law Josh Williams. I'll get him for you."

The two of them were back in minutes.

"Jack tells us you're the man that shot the kangaroos through the head?"

"Is there a problem?"

"No, we were just wondering why someone would bother shooting them in the head?"

"I didn't want them to suffer, and it was close enough for head shots."

"How far away were you?"

Jack spoke up and told them that Josh was shooting Kangaroos between 300 and 400 yards away. They were doubtful to say the least. Josh spoke up and asked them if they wanted a demonstration. When they said yes, Jack asked them if they could be back at first light tomorrow, because it was too dark to see. Josh whispered in his ear that he had brought his night vision scope, and it should still be zeroed for the M - 25. Jack nodded his head, and got a big grin on his face.

"Gentlemen, not only can Josh hit kangaroos at 300 yards, he wanted to show you now that he can do it at night as well!"

They were eager to see this, so they loaded up in Jack's 4x4 pickup, and the brothers followed in theirs. While they were driving, Josh swapped the daylight for the night scope, and loaded a magazine with match ammo. They drove out to 1 of the target stands, put a fresh target up, then drove a quarter-mile by Jack's odometer away from the target. Josh got out, set up his tarp, then the rifle, and after reciting the 23rd Psalm a couple of times, got behind the rifle, and adjusted the scope. He asked for a trial shot to verify his zero, and the scope was still zeroed, since the round was less than half an inch outside the center of the bullseye. He proceeded to fire off 10 rounds, then locked the action open, and put up the rifle. When they drove back to the targets, the brothers were amazed that Josh had shot a 4-inch group at night at 400 yards. Finally Josh let them look through the scope, and they realized he had a night vision scope when they spotted some kangaroos moving about 300 yards away. They asked if they could

take the target with them, and Josh said yes, and they left. They drove back to the house to eat dinner and thought nothing of it.

The next day they went back to the range to shoot pistols. Sheila and Josh were shooting their P-14 Limiteds, and Jack had an assortment of pistols, ranging from an old Webley .455 break-top to a Broomhandle Mauser in 7.62x25mm. Josh wasn't into old British guns, but was impressed by the size of the Webley. It kind of reminded him of his Colt Anaconda. He told Jack that he left his Colt Anaconda and a suppressed Ruger 22/45 in Alaska. Jack said he'd fired the Blackhawk before, and once was enough. Just as they were finishing up, the pickup with the two brothers showed up again. They asked Jack if Josh could attend a ceremony in his honor that evening. They'd drive him over and back later that night. Jack looked at Josh, who looked at Sheila, who shrugged. Josh said "I don't know anything about Aboriginal customs, what do you think Jack?"

"You might want to go, it should be fun, and basically harmless. My guess is the Chief wanted to meet you in person and thank you for the skins."

"Ok, when and where?"

The elder brother looked at the sun, and said, "We'll be back when the sun sets." They climbed into their truck and left. Jack recommended that Josh not bring any modern weapons to the ceremony, that would be offensive to the Aborigines. Josh asked if he could bring his Bowie knife. Not knowing what a vicious weapon a Bowie knife was in the hands of a trained knife fighter, Jack said that they all carried knives, so they'd understand. Josh just grinned, He was as well armed with a Bowie knife as some people were with a gun. When the sun set, the brothers returned. Josh climbed into the truck, and they drove off. On the way there, they talked about everything and nothing at all. Finally they arrived at their camp. Josh was seated at the place of honor next to the chief, and his Eldest son sat next to Josh. He explained that he'd try to answer any of Jack's questions. Jack started off with "Why am I here?"

"You took special trouble to make sure the animals didn't suffer, you're not like the rest of the white men from around here. You also speak English differently than they do."

"I'm from Alaska, it's in the Northern part of the United States."

The elder brother, Bill, translated for his father, who had a limited knowledge of English since he didn't go to an English speaking school like his sons did.

"You seem to care for the animals you hunt, we feel the same, but don't understand why you feel that way."

"We have native people in Alaska called the Inuit, they've lived there forever. They believe in a web of life, and that you shouldn't unnecessarily harm another living being. If you need an

animal for it's fur and flesh, you are not to waste it, and they are thankful to the animal's spirit when they kill it. I don't believe everything they do, but I do value an animal enough not to waste it, or to cause them unnecessary pain."

"Thanks for answering honestly, My father has decided to have a feast in your honor. You will be presented with native foods, some familiar, some unfamiliar. None of which will harm you, If you eat everything placed before you, you will gain status in my father's eyes, and they will respect you. First we will do some dancing, chanting and storytelling. This may seem strange to you, but don't be alarmed. Please don't talk during the chanting or storytelling, it's considered rude. I have to get ready for my part in the ceremony. See you later."

Josh sat there not knowing what to expect when suddenly several men wearing only loincloths were dancing and stomping the ground. One man was playing a strange instrument that Josh learned later was a Didgeridu. Then they started chanting, and Josh appreciated the rhythmic beat, even if he couldn't understand the words. While they were chanting, dishes were being passed around, and every man ate from it. First was grubs. Josh almost passed, then remembered what his E&E instructor said "SEALS can eat anything that doesn't eat them first." and choked down several of them. Next came a beverage that tasted like a cross between tea and beer. It wasn't half bad, so he drank enough to get the taste of the grubs out of his mouth. Next he was handed a bowl of meat that looked like chicken. Bill told him it was lizard. Josh had eaten all kinds of snakes before, and this was no different. Finally they set a huge hind of meat over the coals and roasted it. As it became done, each man got up and sliced a piece off with their knives. Finally Josh got up and sliced a large piece off with his Bowie knife and ate it. It was kind of gamey, and Bill told him it was Kangaroo leg meat. Josh told him it tasted better than that old Grizzly Bear he shot years ago in Alaska. Bill translated, and suddenly the entire camp was whispering. His Dad whispered something back to Bill, who asked him how he killed the Bear.

"It was attacking us while we were out fishing. My Dad and I each shot it with our pistols in the chest, and it dropped deader than a doornail less than 20 yards away."

Bill translated, and his Dad nodded. Josh wasn't rude enough to ask, he guessed if the chief wanted him to know, Bill would translate what he said.

Hours later, when the feast was over, Bill's dad put a leather thong over Josh's neck with a crocodile tooth hanging from the center. Josh thanked the Chief, then they went back home. When they got home, Jack was waiting for them, and Bill was talking to him, and pointed to Josh. When they left Jack told Josh that he made quite an impression on the Chief. He saw the tooth hanging from his neck and said "I guess you really made an impression. The only 2 other white men I know that wear a crocodile tooth are kind of honorary members of the tribe."

Sheila saw the tooth hanging from Josh's neck and told him the same thing. They went inside, sat down and talked, then went to bed since it was late.

Chapter 79 Bond...James Bond

The next day, Josh and Sheila flew home, she had a meeting Monday with her Doctorate mentor. Nick drove Josh to the RAAF base on Monday to meet some people that he was going to work with getting the RAAF up to speed with their new SuperGoose aircraft. They were a cross-section of the wing's personnel. There were mechanics, instructor pilots, supply clerks, and enough brass to make a dozen spittoons. After the first hour or so, the Brass left to get back to their administrative duties. The Supply Clerks were the next to bug out once they got the lists of parts they needed to order, and an idea of how many they were going to use. The mechanics asked the most questions, and got the fewest answers. Some of their questions were so technical that Josh suggested contacting the Tech rep at Northrop/Grumman, or Allakaket Airlines chief mechanic. The maintenance questions were answered by giving them a piece of paper with the recommenced service intervals. Finally he got down to talking with the Instructor Pilots.

“Most of the stuff I’m going to show you is pretty much SOP, but the short field water landing technique is something I’ll have to show you, then coach you through. Most of you are probably used to landing on big long wide runways. The SuperGoose is capable of landing and taking off from tiny lakes that are maybe 1 mile long, and less than 1/4 mile wide with obstructions on both ends.” Josh went along to describe the exact conditions at his home lake HelpMeJack lake, and brought a photocopy of the relevant chart to prove it. They were astounded that anyone would try to land on such a small lake. Josh explained that Alaskan Bush Pilots did it all the time. People didn’t have the luxury of living where there were huge lakes that were easy to land on, so the bush pilots learned to float their planes in just above stall and land as close to the shore as possible to give them the maximum run length to slow down once they hit the lake. He said that with the reversible pitch props, the SuperGoose was capable of landing and stopping within 50 yards of touch down. Several hands flew up at this point.

“Sir, how do you keep the plane from nosing over when you apply that much reverse thrust?”

“With the wing-mounted engines and props, you’ve got a lot of leeway before you endanger the props. The plane usually comes to a complete stop before the nose digs in much. I’ve backed and turned the aircraft using prop thrust only, and the prop tips never get close to the ground or the water.”

Josh told them he’d spend the next several weeks teaching them how to perform the short-field landing and take off, then he’d be available for questions. He handed the IP’s his schedule showing each IP had 2 sessions with him in the next two weeks, so they had to concentrate and not waste his time. General Ratliff wanted the IP’s training his C-130 pilots in 30 days, so they had to learn how to fly the SuperGoose in a hurry. One of the IP’s asked Josh why they called the plane the SuperGoose, and he sat down to explain it.

“Back in WWII, Grumman built the original Grumman Goose with 2 Wasp radial engines. It was supposed to be a mini-Catalina, except it was underpowered, and didn’t have much range, so the military never bought as many of them as the much bigger Catalina. Later a Canadian company installed turboprop engines in the aircraft, but they weren’t much better. Allison Engines designed a much bigger turboprop that would barely fit inside the engine nacelles that closely resembled the current C-130 turboprop, but about half to two-thirds the size. They only made 4 turboprops, and never installed them in an aircraft, reserving them for bench test use. My Dad was flying a DeHaviland in Alaska, when he wrecked the plane making an emergency landing. He had just inherited several million dollars, and used the money to retrofit the Grumman Goose with the Allison turboprops. He knew the Chief mechanic at Elmendorf Air Force base, who knew the Chief Mechanic at RCAF Vancouver, who had several old Grumman Goose airframes sitting in the boneyard, and the knowledge to install the turboprops in the Goose since they worked on C-130s. Later, He wanted some more airplanes, but was out of engines, so he contacted Allison, and they were astounded that someone had installed their test-bench engines into an aircraft, and they were flying. They flew to Allakaket, saw the engines, and decided they could install newer more powerful modern engines into the spot where the old ones were designed to fit. The RCAF got wind of the new engines, and suggested some improvements, like a 6 foot fuselage stretch, and a tail ramp with a twin-boom tail to clear the ramp. Between the new engines, the longer fuselage, and other improvements, Northrop/Grumman decided the plane needed a new name, and my Dad came up with the SuperGoose, and it stuck.”

“Wow, that’s some history. I hope it flies as good as it looks!”

Josh decided to take the Senior Instructor up that afternoon, and show him what the plane was capable of. After he dismissed the class, he asked the Senior IP if he had some time that afternoon to go flying. Josh wanted to show him the STOL capabilities of the aircraft, so he wouldn’t have to show everyone. He was eager to try it, and told Josh his name was Commander Miles. Josh shook his hand, opened up the SuperGoose to show him just how big the passenger/cargo area was. His comment echoed the WC, “Bloody Hell, you could fit a Jeep back here!”

He took Commander Miles around the plane, showing him everything you needed to check in the walk-around, then he climbed into the cockpit, and with an airman standing by with a fire extinguisher, fired up the APU, and started turbine 1, then turbine 2. When both were in the green, he waved for the airman to pull the chocks, and advanced the throttles out of idle, then contacted the tower, got permission for a flight demonstration, taxied to the active runway while configuring the plane for a max-performance take-off. Once he reached the end of the runway, he advised Commander Miles to tighten his belts, and called the tower for clearance. They gave him immediate clearance, and advised the pattern was clear. That was all Josh needed to hear. He replied “rolling” and quickly advanced the throttles to Max. A second later, he released the brakes, and the SuperGoose rapidly accelerated down the runway. The screaming turbines were drowned out by the roar of the propellers, and as soon as he reached 85 knots, he pulled back on

the yoke aggressively, and the SuperGoose practically jumped into the air. He held his maximum climb rate while cleaning up the plane, retracting the flaps and the wheels. 2 minutes later, they were at 5,000 AGL. Commander Miles was shaking his head and grinning from ear to ear. Once he was over the reservoir, Josh performed a wingover, and bottomed out right at 500 feet AGL. He slowed to 85 knots while cranking madly on the flaps control. Once the flaps were at full, he turned to the downwind end of the lake, and reduced his throttles until he had achieved the sink rate he wanted. When he cleared the rise, he reduced throttle even further, and maintained a 10 degree nose-up attitude while he floated down to the lake like he was on a parachute. Right before touchdown, he pushed the nose forward and landed conventionally, then flipped the pitch reverse switch, and went to 30% throttle on both turbines. They stopped like someone had thrown out an anchor less than 50 yards after touchdown. When they turned around, Commander Miles couldn't believe how close to the edge of the lake they were. He'd never attempt a landing like that with a conventional plane, but obviously the SuperGoose could do it, because Josh was sitting there, and they just did it!

"I don't know how you did it, but you just did - can you talk me through it?"

"Ok, basically I'm landing on the ragged edge of a stall. With the high wing, leading edge slats, and large flaps, we can stay in control closer to a stall, and float down with a slight nose-up attitude, say like 10 degrees at 65 knots airspeed. Once I touched down, I flipped the pitch reversing switch, and advanced the throttles to 30%. You can use 100% in an emergency, but you risk putting the plane on it's nose. I use 30% lightly loaded, and 50% when I'm fully loaded. Between the drag of the water and the thrust of the props, you stop like you threw out an anchor. Fully loaded, the plane takes longer to land, but it still lands much shorter with the reversing props than without. The plane can land on snow with the auxiliary skis, but it takes longer to land due to the lower drag."

"Ok, so you can land on a dime, how about the short take-off characteristics."

"Since it's an amphibian, it needs a longer run to take off from water, but once you're airborne, you've got a 2500 feet per minute climb rate, and an emergency climb rate of 3,000 feet per minute. The Vr is 85 knots with 20% flaps on water or land. On most small lakes, there is no V1, once you start your take-off roll, you're committed, since it takes too long to slow back down."

"How about using the reversing switch in an emergency abort?"

"Never been tried to my knowledge. If it were a choice between damaging the engines and crashing, I'd sacrifice the engines, but it's never came up before. You'd have to be awfully quick to successfully abort a water take off from most of the lakes I landed on in Alaska."

"Ok, from what I've been told, the RAAF is thinking about using the SuperGoose as a coastal patrol craft, so we'd be landing in bays or the ocean."

“You might want to talk to Northrop/Grumman about that. My dad told me they did a testing series with the prototype SuperGoose, and they know what kind of sea states they could successfully land the plane on.”

“Thanks, Josh, that’s good to know.”

Commander Miles was writing notes feverishly, he’d wished he’d brought a tape recorder, and made a note to bring one next time.

“Commander, I just thought of something. The KC-130 is set up for midair refueling. If you could have Grumman install a Navy-style refueling probe, you could have a KC-130 set up as a mother ship for several SuperGoose planes, and keep them in the air much longer.”

“Several of our turboprops can be configured for midair refueling. It’s a good idea, and I’ll pass it along. Ok, now let’s see how this plane takes off from water!”

Josh taxied to the downwind end of the lake, turned around, set the flaps for 20%, then quickly advanced the throttles. After covering about half the lake, the airspeed indicator read 85, knots, and he pulled back gently on the yoke. He had already shown Commander Miles a max-performance take-off, so he took it easy this time. Once they were 2,000 feet AGL, he turned toward the RAAF base, and explained to the Commander that he’d left a lot of performance behind, since he’d already seen a max performance take-off, and there were no real obstructions around the lake. In the event that they were taking off with close high obstructions, he could use a higher rate of climb to clear the obstruction, trading speed for altitude. When they set back down at the RAAF base, Commander Miles shook Josh’s hand and said he was looking forward to training with him on the SuperGoose, turned and left. Nick walked up and said their Hummers were done, the body shop called, and said they were ready for pickup. He wasn’t doing anything the rest of the afternoon, and Sheila was available, so he could drop them off at the shop so they could drive both Hummers home.

They drove home, picked up Sheila, and drove to the body shop. Josh was greeted by a scene straight out of a James Bond movie when a guy who vaguely resembled Q popped out of the Hummer and proceeded to describe all the upgrades he had installed.

“Pay attention young man, I’ve installed several upgrades you need to know about. Don’t touch anything.”

Josh took his hands off the vehicle and put them in his pockets, patiently waiting for the old man to tell him what he did to his precious Hummer.

The old geezer resumed his monologue “Right, first off, instead of just lining the body with Kevlar fabric, I took the liberty of installing rigid molded Kevlar plate, just like the Apache. It saved the weight of all the steel plate I’d have to use to back the Kevlar fabric, and the 1/4”

plates I installed have the same bullet resistance of 1 inch of steel armor plate, with the weight of aluminum. The entire engine compartment including the hood, all 4 doors, and the rear body panels have the kevlar plates. The roof is kevlar armored and structurally reinforced in the event of a rollover, and I installed a continuous 1/4" steel skid plate backed up by more rigid kevlar. You could trip your average anti-vehicle mine in your new Hummer, and walk away from it. I also installed a smoke screen device that sprays motor oil into the exhaust pipe from a large reservoir, which should make a huge smoke screen. I also installed front and rear 5 million candlepower strobes to blind anyone chasing or shooting at you. Also, I installed an anti-carjacking device that charges the door handles to 50,000 volts when you press the button on the center of your smart stalk. Your remote control also activates it, make sure you don't push button #2 by accident, or you'll have a shocking experience."

Josh stood there open-mouthed "What no ejection seat?"

"That costs extra!"

"Good thing, I don't think Sheila would approve."

"Who's Sheila?"

"That's me gramps!"

The old man started laughing hysterically "A Sheila named Sheila, your dad must have a twisted sense of humor."

Sheila stared at him darkly, and said in a low menacing voice "Yeah, he does, and your point was?"

"Nothing my dear, just enjoying life where I can."

He continued to describe the modifications, and told Josh that with the Kevlar and the Banks kit, including the propane injector, he might want to take it easy on the throttle until he got used to it. Sheila's Hummer (he snickered) had even more power due to the better designed turbocharger. He highly suggested carrying spare axle shafts, since that was the weak point in the Hummer's drive train. All 4 tires were already set up from the factory as run-flats, so he didn't need to do anything to them. He modified the roller fairlead to fit his new bumper, and showed Josh where the kangaroo bars went from the front bumper to the roof rack. Josh looked at the roof rack, and there were a half-dozen 100-watt Hella driving lights mounted up there that weren't there before. He asked the guy, and he said "Oh, I just threw that in, and I upgraded the charging system by adding a second high-output alternator and a dual battery set-up. I added a remote air tank to supplement your Central Tire Inflation System. Any Questions?"

"Where's the rocket launcher?"

“I skipped the rocket launcher and BMG-50, you can add it later if you want.”

Josh climbed up into his Hummer, turned the key, and the diesel roared to life. Sheila found it much easier to step on the nerf bar step on the way up to the driver’s seat. Josh checked the gun port, and saw it was 1 inch in diameter, so he could fire a witness protection shotgun out of it if he wanted to. He saw a bag on the floor with 6 body plugs to replace the plugs if he had to. The old geezer showed him the controls to the special accessories. He had hid the switches in the center console, and Josh was thinking “Bond...James Bond!” The old geezer turned on his CD player, and the Bond theme started playing. Josh started laughing his head off as he drove out of the garage.

Chapter 80 Sex & Guns

When they got home, Sheila picked up on the “Bond” theme, and thought that he’d think it was funny to make love to a “Bond Girl”, and set the scene before Josh could get home. Josh came home to a scene right out of “From Russia with Love” - the strange naked girl in your bed. Josh thought it was funny as heck as soon as he figured it out, and played along. Later, he was checking around the house for “KGB Assassins” when Nick came home. Josh was glad he put his clothes on, and he realized something - they really needed a house of their own! Once he explained to Nick why he was skulking around the house in his boxers, he asked him if he had any spring steel straps. Nick thought that logic disconnect was strange, even for a Yank. Josh explained that he had 4 Uzis, and 2 Hummers. He wanted His and Hers under-seat mounts for the Uzis, to keep them out of plain sight, but handy. Nick said he’d call the base mechanic tomorrow, since he was a gun nut as well, and ask if he could fab up 4 sets of retaining straps for a Mini-Uzi. With that out of the way, Josh asked him if he knew of any good building sites in Sydney, or any houses with a good watertight concrete basement with at least 4 bedrooms that could be retrofitted into a high-security house. Nick offered to sell him his house, but Josh told him it was smack in the middle of town, and if TSHTF, it would be one of the first houses to get attacked and raided by the starving masses. Nick laughed at the image, then realized Josh was dead serious. Nick had never considered security past keeping out the occasional hooligan. The house had always been in the family, and it screamed old money with a red brick wall topped with a wrought iron palisade. It looked intimidating, but Josh had showed him one day that you could get over it easily if you knew how. Finally Nick told him to contact a friend of his that was a Real Estate Agent, who knew the area like the back of his hand.

Sheila heard Nick talking to Josh, got dressed quickly and erased all evidence of their “Bond” scene, then came out to say Hi to Nick. “I heard you guys talking, what’s this about wanting to move?”

“Sheila, much as I like staying with Nick, we need our privacy, and it doesn’t do us a lot of good to own 2 Urban Assault Vehicles if our house is as easy to break into as a Cracker Jack Box.”

“See here Old Man - I’ve upgraded the security since our last conversation.”

“Yeah, and it all presupposes that the Police will be available to respond to your alarm call. You’ve got too many huge windows, and they’re too low for safety. Also they’re the old style windows with individual panes, and all you need to pop out a pane is a good knife that you’re not too worried about breaking the tip. Let’s say TSHTF, and the cops can’t respond. What are you going to do if a dozen hooligans attack the house at once, and try to break in. Now let’s say that 1 or 2 have Molotov Cocktails.”

“I’ve got my Enfield!”

“Great, while you’re firing that old warhorse, the rest of the mob swarms you and sets the house ablaze. Now you call the Fire Department, and the phone just keeps ringing...get my drift?”

“I guess you’re saying this big old house is almost totally defenseless if things went bad and the Police weren’t around. It’s been in the family for hundreds of years. Not that I’m that attached to the old drafty castle!”

“So why don’t you sell, and build a modern much more defensible house over by us in the suburbs.”

“Thanks Mate, I think I’ll do just that!”

“DAMN!”

“What’s wrong Josh?”

“I forgot a big huge part of our plans - I’ve got 2 Hummers with 50-gallon diesel tanks, and it’s over 1,000 miles to Sheila’s parents station. Unloaded, I’m getting maybe 10 miles per gallon. Loaded, I’ll be lucky if I get 5. That means if both tanks are fully loaded when the balloon goes up, I’ll only make it 250-500 miles before running out of fuel!”

“Well you could always fly the SuperGoose over there?”

“Right, the RAAF field’s practically in Downtown Sydney. What if I can’t get there, or the field’s been hit?”

“Bloody Hell, I forgot about that! How much weight can you tow with those Hummers?”

“Stock, maybe 7,000 pounds. With the upgraded motors, and everything maybe 15,000.”

“Why not just tow an old M -5 Trailer behind you?”

“Good Idea, but I’ve got 1 better, I’ll call Q and see if he can build me something. Doesn’t do a lot of good to have an armored Hummer attached to an unarmored trailer full of Diesel!”

“Yikes! And it’s not like you can’t afford it.”

Josh called the Body Shop “Is Q there?”

“One minute.” (laughter in the background - off phone he hears “Q - Telly” and more laughter.)

When Q picked up, Josh said “Q it’s Josh, yeah the guy with the 2 Hummers you did. Say, I need a favor. Can you build me 2 heavy duty trailers for my Hummers? Great, I’ll be right over.”

“Sheila, I’m going to the body shop to talk with Q, you want to come with me?”

“Not really, if he makes one more crack about my name, I’m liable to shoot him.”

“Ok, I’ll be home for dinner.”

When Josh got to the shop, Q was busy at his blackboard designing his version of the Bug Out trailer. It used a heavy torsion bar suspension to eliminate the axle, so if it high-centered, it would contact the skid plate and Teflon sliders running under the trailer. He had a brilliant idea to make the entire trailer out of rigid molded Kevlar and build it around a huge box frame so it could haul 20,000 pounds easy. Q decided to use the same wheels and tires that were on the Hummers to make things easy, and designed the trailer to haul 100 gallons of fresh water with a high-tech Reverse Osmosis/desalinator filter and a dual-pump setup with a high-lift and a high-pressure pump so he could use any source of water he found, even sea water. Josh told him how far he had to go, and he told Josh that water weighed around 8 pounds per gallon, and the 100 gallon tank added 800 pounds already. Josh suggested cutting it down to 50 gallons, since he had the RO/Desalinator, and double the diesel tank. Q nodded and went back to his figures. What he came up with was sheer genius in Josh’s eyes. The trailer itself was rated at 25,000 pounds, yet only weighed around 1,000, all the wiring was hidden in the box tubing that made up the frame, and was covered with Kevlar and a continuous skid plate. Q used the space between the frame rails to store Diesel fuel and water tanks, freeing up the huge space inside for storage. He designed a healthy battery bank made up of 800Ah worth of Optima deep cycle AGM type batteries, and 2,000 watt inverter, and all of it charged by the vehicle through the custom trailer plug mounted next to the standard trailer plug on the towing hitch. With 2 huge alternators and a dual-battery set-up, Josh thought the battery bank and inverters was overkill until Q asked him “What if you need AC power, and you don’t want to run the diesel and make a lot of noise?”

Q went back to his figures, and Josh sat there and marveled at the genius at work. Finally Q said “I can do it, but it won’t be cheap.”

“Good, I need 2 of them, what would you charge me for 2?”

“Say \$100 thousand a piece, that Kevlar’s bloody expensive.”

Josh called Nick and asked him if he’d like a trailer, and he said that the Hummer wasn’t his, it belonged to the RAAF, and his wasn’t bulletproof. Josh ended the call and told Q he’d take 2 for now. Q went over his figures, and told Josh that he could squeeze 50 gallons of water, and 200 gallons of diesel tanks between the frame rails, but that only gave him 1,000 miles worth of

extra diesel. Josh said it was only 500 miles up the coast to Brisbane, and he'd work something out.

Later that evening, when he got home, he asked Nick if there were any small airports in Brisbane. Sheila said "Yeah, the one we landed at you dork!"

Josh shook his head, sometimes he'd forget his head if it wasn't attached. Josh told Sheila and Nick his idea about leasing a hangar at the airport, and installing his own tanks for JP-5 and Diesel. It wouldn't cost that much, and if he hid them well and buried them, no one would find them, even if they ransacked the hangar. Nick thought it was a good idea for more reasons than 1, including a place to stop overnight if he had to whether he was flying or driving between Sydney and wherever. Nick told Josh he had talked to his friend the real estate friend, and he told him that he could get \$100 million for the old family estate, sight unseen, since developers had lusted after his 100 acres of prime downtown real estate for decades. Nick was the last member of his family which could trace their roots back to the original convict ships. He had a huge trust fund, but he wasn't in any hurry to marry. He was an only child, and his parents had died years ago in a car crash. Sheila's eldest brother Tim was his best friend, and when he got killed in a plane crash, he withdrew into himself and threw himself into his work. Even before the crash, he had a steady stream of girlfriends, or as Tim used to say his "playmate of the week" since they were usually stunningly beautiful models with not much else going for them. When Sheila applied to the University of New South Wales, she was already good friends with Nick, so he had no problem letting her room in his 50-room mansion. All he asked was that she do some light housekeeping when she had time, since most of his girlfriends couldn't figure out how to turn on a vacuum cleaner. Now that Josh and Sheila were looking for a new home of their own, there was no reason to hold on to the old white elephant.

Nick told them he'd located 2 10-acre lots on the far edge of town, and they were surrounded by farmland so it would be decades before anyone could build around them. Then he told them that he wanted to build a secure 4-bedroom house and he'd leave the design of the outer shell up to Josh. Josh and Sheila had talked, and she said they had better plan on having 4 kids if they kept up the way they were going, so for each kid to have their own bedroom, with a spare for an office and study for Sheila, they wanted a 6-bedroom design with 3 full-size bathrooms. In order to make the bedrooms big and roomy, they settled on a 3,000 square foot ranch design. Josh had called Ralph, and got his design for his house in Anchorage, and thought it would be perfect with a few modifications. He liked Ralph's ideas about the ham radios, and talked to Sheila, only to find out she already had her unrestricted license. Josh checked into the requirements, and realized that he could already pass the test for an unrestricted license since he could transmit and copy Morse at 20wpm. He located a local Australian radio dealer, who recommended the same units Ralph bought, but set up for Australian frequencies. Everyone world-wide used the same 10 meter frequencies so they could talk to each other, but they alternated frequencies on the mid-range bands to avoid interference. Josh knew he could wait until they built their house to get their long-range communications, but he wanted to get some mobile long distance equipment as soon as he could. He asked Nick what the RDF used, and

they had an older version of the SINGARS system. He asked Nick how tough it would be to get a radio installed in each of their Hummers. Nick said he'd ask his Wing Commander, but was pretty sure it would be OK as long as they didn't cause a problem.

Josh asked Nick if he could use his computer for a minute, logged onto the internet, and quickly located the site for the Australian Communications Association, the governing body for radio communications in Australia. He was referred to another site, and discovered that what he wanted was an Unrestricted license, like Sheila already had. She had her old study guide, so when he wasn't working with the RAAF Instructor Pilots for the next two weeks, he would be studying to pass his Unrestricted exam. The next day, Nick talked to his Wing Commander, who authorised him to have 2 Military radios installed in Josh and Sheila's Hummers. He called Josh and gave him the good news, so Josh met him at the base radio shop, and several hours later, had a full-spectrum military radio installed in his Hummer. He told Nick he'd drive Sheila's rig tomorrow so they could install one in her's. The next day he drove Sheila's rig to work, and they installed a military radio in her rig as well. Josh suddenly remembered he'd forgotten to load the 'secret compartment' in the backs of the Hummers, and took care of that little detail when he got home. The case was so well hidden that Josh wasn't sure it was there until he lifted a corner of the carpet, and noticed it was only velcroed down. He pulled up the corner, folded the carpet back, and inserted a high-security key he found on his keychain into the lock, and turned it. Once the lock was unlocked, the lid opened by itself. Evidently Q had used the same type of gas lifts that they used for the rear hatch of an SUV. He loaded the M - 4 SOPMOD kit with 20 loaded 30 round magazines, and the rest of his Militia kit that Bear had shipped him, including his ballistic vest with front and rear chicken plates, and his LBV full of gear. He made sure all the grenade pockets were full of 40mm grenades for his M -203, then transferred the loaded 30 round mags into the magazine pockets and checked the rest of his gear. When he was satisfied everything was where it belonged, he did the same with Sheila's vehicle. When he finished, he loaded a combat pack of 600 rounds of SS-109 on stripper clips into the compartment of each vehicle, then added anything else they could use for a bug-out, evacuation, or get-home situation. He still had room left over, so he doubled the .223 and .45acp ammo storage.

Several weeks later, Q called to tell him the trailers were done, and he'd appreciate if he could pick them up soon, because they were taking up room. Since Sheila wasn't doing anything, they drove over to Q's shop, connected the hitches, drove them back to Nick's place and parked them in his garage. Josh made a list of stuff he wanted to fill the trailers with, and got on the Internet and ordered enough so he'd be able to stock both trailers. He showed the list to Sheila, and she added several items he never would have thought about. Next they went to the stores and bought some stuff locally to save shipping. They had food, water, clothing, misc. supplies, shelter, spare ammo and parts for the guns and the Hummers, Jerry cans of diesel and water, and a whole bunch of stuff Josh just threw in there because he thought that they might need it. Later, He drove his loaded trailer over to a shipping yard and borrowed their scales. Fully loaded with water and diesel, the trailer only weighed 7500 pounds. Josh was very happy, since that was only 500 pounds over the design limit before modifications. The trailer was

fitted with a rear ramp door to allow easy loading and unloading, that was powered by an electric winch in the front of the trailer that used cables and pulleys to raise and lower the fully armored and braced door. Q told him he designed the ramp to handle 5,000 pounds, although he never expected Josh to try and load anything over half that heavy since the ramp was pretty steep and the winch was only rated at 12,000 pounds. Q being the clever chap he was decided that once the ramp was down, the winch should be able to help him load the trailer, and devised a quick-disconnect device for the ramp cables. He told Josh the trailer was as bullet-proof as the Hummer, and between the skid plate and rigid Kevlar, it could handle an anti-vehicle mine too without blowing up. Josh noticed that Q had installed brackets on each corner of the trailer, and rummaging around found 4 12vdc 100-watt work lights that Q had designed to mount to the bracket with full freedom of movement to tilt 120 degrees, and swivel almost 180 degrees before they ran out of room. Evidently the only thing Q didn't think of was an electric toothbrush, but Josh was pretty sure he'd find one if he looked hard enough. One thing that amazed him was the fully-loaded trailer had the same manners as trailer designed for hauling long distances at high speeds on roads. He traced the wiring, and realized Q had installed electric trailer brakes and hidden the wiring so well that Josh only discovered it by a diligent search. Another neat feature was the way the ramp worked. Q programmed a button on his remote to raise and lower the ramp, and also installed a switch inside the Hummer.

Josh wanted to try a trial run with the Hummers, so he asked Sheila if they could go tent camping in the desert that weekend. She looked at him like he was from Mars until he said that they needed a trial run to make sure everything worked before they needed it for real. Sheila said she knew of a primitive camping ground right outside Sydney, so they were only a couple of hours away if they needed help. Remembering his desert survival training, Josh made sure he had several large tarps with aluminum tent poles and stakes in the kits, as well as a large dome tent and sleeping bags. He knew that the large tarps would keep the sun off the tent and off them as they sat underneath it, making the conditions more livable. He remembered to pack camping chairs as well, then didn't think about it again until Friday night after work, when he double-checked everything, then they went to bed. The next morning after breakfast, they packed the rest of the stuff they needed in Josh's Hummer, hitched up the trailer, and hit the road. Sheila gave him directions, and 2 hours later, they arrived at the campsite. Josh thought it was the most God-forsaken place on the planet. He was used to things being green and wet, not dry and desolate. He was glad that they had filled up 2 5-gallon Jerry cans full of water before they left, and the trailer's water and diesel tanks were full. They pitched the tarps and the tent, and Sheila asked him why he pitched the tent under the tarp, so he said that it would be 20 degrees cooler during the heat of the day under the dark blue tarp than without it, even with the tent's integral rain fly. The tarp was several feet above the tent, and the tent was in full shade most of the day. Josh decided to save 2 poles and attached the dining fly to the same poles as the front of the tent, to shade that area even further. Once the tent and tarps were up and staked, Josh tied some yellow surveyor's tape to the guy lines so they wouldn't trip, while Sheila set up the kitchen. Josh picked up their folding shovel, and went 50 yards downwind behind some large bushes and built their latrine. He stuck the shovel in the ground next to the pile of dirt, and put a roll of TP on the handle of the shovel. He walked back to the camp and told Sheila

where the bathroom was. She'd forgotten that little detail, and he could tell she wasn't happy about it. "Dear, if you want to survive if TSHTF, you'll have to accept some things. The first one is there won't always be a convenient bathroom when you need to go. Learning to use a latrine is a good skill to learn. First thing you want to do before you drop your drawers is to look around for snakes and stuff. Since there's no one around here, it might be better for you to take your pants off before you go until you get used to squatting to avoid any embarrassing incidents."

"Thanks for that infobit, Tarzan. I think I can figure it out, I wasn't always a city girl!"

"OK, don't say I didn't warn you."

Josh spent the rest of the day patiently explaining various ways of navigating in the wilderness without a map or compass, and how to start a fire without using a lighter, matches, or flint and steel. He explained that you always wanted to have 3 means of starting a fire on your person, but you should also know how to start a fire without them just in case. He helped her build a fire bow and drill, and soon she had a fire going. Josh was proud of her, because he feared she didn't have any survival knowledge. When they finished she told him that her Dad had taught her all this stuff when she was a little girl, but the refresher training was helpful since she hadn't done most of it for 20 years. He showed her how to count paces, estimate distances, get a rough sense of direction using a watch and the sun (he laughed when he remembered the joke they used to tell about the guy who tried to do it with a digital watch). Finally he took out his fanny pack kit, and went through all of it with her. 99% of it was review for her, but she thought the snare wire and PJ saturated cotton balls in a film can was a neat trick. He showed her his altoids kit, and she amazed him by showing him hers. She said her dad made one up for her almost 20 years ago, and she never went anywhere without it. It was like putting on her watch in the morning to slip her Altoids tin into her front pocket. Josh was glad that Jack had taken the time to teach his kids about wilderness survival, because there certainly was a lot of it around! When it got dark, he lit the propane lantern, and started dinner. A large can of Chilli and a box of Macaroni and Cheese made a quick and easy dinner, then they went to bed early. The next morning Josh heard a familiar shriek, and quickly located the sound as coming from the latrine. As he ran over, he saw Sheila's red face peaking over the bushes.

"Damn it - I thought I knew how to do this!"

"When was the last time you used a latrine?"

"I was about 12 - why?"

"Sheila, your body shape has radically changed since then. I hate to be indelicate, but you might try a deep squat next time." He came back several minutes later with a trash bag for her dirty clothes. "Here, put your pants and underwear in here. I didn't bring any way to wash clothes. I guess that's the first thing I should add to my list."

Josh came back 2 minutes later with another pair of pants and underwear for her. Sheila cleaned herself up as best as possible, then said “Did you bring a shower with you?”

Josh rummaged through their kit, and located 1. Since they had 60 gallons of water on them, he felt it was worth it to fill the shower with 3 gallons of water and hang it off the trailer.

“Sheila, I found the shower, but I’m fresh out of tarps.”

“That’s OK, I ran around buck naked until I reached puberty, and there’s no one around to notice.” She stepped around the bush wearing only her top and her boots, and walked over to the trailer like she had been doing it all her life. She traded her boots and socks for sandals, and took her top off. Josh handed her some liquid soap, and she stood there and took a shower totally unconcerned that she was totally naked in the wilderness. Josh handed her a towel, and she dried herself off, then Josh handed her a fresh set of clothes.

“Talk about Tarzan, I don’t think I could just get naked in front of everyone and take a shower like that.”

“For one thing, you’re the only 1 here that we know about, second of all, you’ve showered with me before, and 3rd of all, like I said, I used to run around naked until I was a teenager all summer at the station. It was too damn hot to wear clothes all summer, and I got a great tan. Ever since we were out of nappies, all of us used to run around naked, and didn’t think anything about it. Once we started puberty, we had to wear at least a sun dress during the summer, and the boys wore shorts. I didn’t wear a bra until Nick suggested I wear one when I went to College, since the city kids weren’t used to our country ways, and might assume I was a loose woman. I still don’t like wearing them, but I’ve been wearing one so long that I sag if I don’t.”

“Don’t worry what you’re wearing around me. Once we get our own home, if you want to run around buck naked, go for it - won’t bother me in the least!”

“What about the neighbors?”

“Close the blinds silly, or get some heavy shears so they can’t see in.”

“I always did like nude sunbathing, but it gave Nick fits when he found me out back in the all-together. Guess he thought of me as a kid sister.”

“If you like, I can add a privacy screen to our back yard, and a pool, so you can sunbathe or go swimming in the buff on the back patio all you want.”

Sheila gave Josh a big kiss, and she was glad he wasn’t a prude.

Chapter 81 - In the Wilderness

Later that afternoon, Sheila started teaching Josh some of the stuff the aboriginal kids that they hung out with showed them, including tracking and locating water in the desert. Josh was glad that Sheila knew so much about the Australian Outback, because his survival briefing and Desert Survival Training course was pretty generic. The location-specific information, coupled with his general desert survival knowledge meant if they got stranded or had to bug out, they had a pretty good chance of survival. Sheila located 2 brackish water sources, and Josh told her that with the Trailer and the filter, they could use almost any water including seawater. She said that some water in Australia was alkali or contaminated with heavy metals. Josh was pretty sure that the RO system would take care of it, and made a note to double-check, and stock a spare filter. She also pointed out that some water sources were too far from the beaten path to get the trailer near them. Josh made a note to add a siphon pump and a large water container, since the RO made 1 gallon of fresh water for every 10 gallons it took in. He decided to add an interesting device he'd seen that combined wheels and a sled, so if the sand or snow was too deep, he could drag the heavy plastic sled, and when he was on hard pack, he could use the wheels, which came off with 1 bolt each. He showed Sheila his idea, and she suggested a double-harness setup so she could help pull, and they could max out the trailer/sled setup's maximum hauling weight. Josh knew that he could use a simple filter with a good strong pump and a simple easily replaceable filter to pre-filter any water he wanted to run through the RO system, or filter any water he knew wasn't carrying bugs or anything else that could harm them. He knew that 10 gallons of water weighted 80 pounds, and the two of them could haul 200 pounds easy with the cart, so all he had to come up with was the proper containers to haul that much water on the standard-sized trailer, which would carry around 200 pounds worth of deer or other large game animal. All this stuff went into a notebook he'd review when he got back.

When it got dark, Josh gathered anything that would burn, and was surprised at how little vegetation there was in the area. Sheila said that the city slickers had been camping here for decades, and since they were too lazy to haul wood from town, or willing to walk far to gather their own, the area was pretty sparsely covered in useable stuff. Josh thought that if he collected newspapers, and rolled them into bundles, they'd make a good emergency fuel supply for campfires and stuff. If he treated them with paraffin, they'd work even better. He asked Sheila if they had any cabinetmaker's shops nearby, or anyone that made huge piles of sawdust. When she looked at him funny, he explained if you collected the sawdust cheaply, as long as it wasn't pressure-treated lumber, you could make your own "presto logs" by mixing the sawdust and paraffin into a log shape. You could do the same thing with rolled up newspaper bundles, but the color ink made it not a good idea to cook over. He told her that 100% cotton dryer lint made an excellent firestarter, and to save all the lint she took off the screens after she dried the towels, but not to save the lint from synthetics, since it didn't work too good. He said that if you saved egg cartons, and added a mixture of dryer lint and paraffin, you could break it into individual "eggs" and have 12 good firestarters from a carton of 12 eggs.

Thinking about the water, Josh had another brilliant idea. “Sheila, how deep is the water table around here?”

“Some spots, hundreds of feet, some maybe 10-20. Why?”

“Just an idea I just had to build a mini-well. If I could drive a pipe that was just slightly bigger than the pickup tube of the RO system, it can draft water, and can lift water up to 50 feet to the filter. All I need is a small sand point, and a fence-post driver to drive a 1" steel tube into the ground deep enough to strike water, then the RO's pump can pump it up and into the system.”

“Have you ever driven anything into the ground?”

“Fenceposts - why?”

“After you get down maybe 4-5 feet, it gets REAL hard - even a big strong SEAL like you would take forever getting much past 6 feet, maybe you ought to build a driver that could repeatedly drive a heavy weight onto the pipe - like a pile driver, but much smaller!”

“Sounds like I've got some research to do! Ok, I can buy the threaded pipe in 5 foot sections, and, if I dropped a 50-lb weight 3 feet, it should move it pretty good. I'd need an 10-foot derrick with a single pulley and a motor that could repeatedly lift and drop the weight, or a compound pulley and muscle power. I'll start making a list, and make some phone calls.”

Josh started sketching some ideas, and showing them to Sheila. She took a pad and pencil, and drew a much simpler design that was portable, and under the right conditions, could drive a 1-2" water pipe with a sand point down 50 feet. Josh figured out an easy way to raise the weight repeatedly using a dc motor, and they congratulated themselves..

After dinner, they crawled into their sleeping bags, and several hours later, they awoke with their teeth chattering. Josh said “Sheila, you awake?”

“Can't you hear my teeth chattering?”

“I might be able to help that, I'll be back in a second.”

2 minutes later, Josh returned with 2 Mylar bags, and told Sheila to get out of her sleeping bag, and slip the Mylar bag inside the sleeping bag. She was too cold to argue, so she slid out, and hurriedly slid back in. 2 hours later she was warm and asleep. The next morning she woke to Josh brewing coffee. She got dressed quickly (it was still cold out) and came out of the tent just in time for Josh to hand her a nice hot cup of coffee, and breakfast of powdered scrambled eggs and freeze-dried hash browns mixed with TVP bacon. It was OK, but not what she would consider haute cuisine. Once she finished eating, she asked Josh “What's the deal with the Mylar Bags? I was warm within an hour or two.”

“The Mylar bags acted as a vapor barrier. Since you loose a lot of heat through sweating, if you hold it close to your skin, you reach equilibrium and stop sweating, and you stay warmer as a result. The military figured that out a couple of years ago, and all our cold-weather bags contain a vapor barrier layer, and we sleep in polypropylene long johns, since it keeps the moisture off our skin so we don’t feel so clammy. I noticed you slept in the buff last night. Much as I like you to sleep naked, If it’s cold out, you might want to try polypro long johns.”

“Thanks for being so considerate!”

“You’re welcome, now we have to try out some other stuff to make sure we didn’t forget anything. First of all, let’s go through our BOB’s and see if there’s anything you don’t know how to use, or if I’ve forgotten anything that might be useful. Once we’re done there, let’s check our fanny pack/E&E kits, then let’s check our raid vests in the Secret Compartment.”

Sheila went through her BOB, and made a couple of suggestions. They weren’t essential for survival, but they didn’t weigh much either, and could make them more comfortable. She also suggested a 6-foot nylon casting/gill net with a small mesh to catch anything in the water, because even minnows or small crustaceans were edible, or made good bait. Josh wrote everything she said down, because you never knew what might be significant. She thought the E&E kits were fine, but didn’t know how to use some of the stuff that was in there, so Josh showed her how.

They broke camp before dark and headed home so they could sleep in their nice warm beds and have a real shower and real food before they went to work Monday. Josh made some phone calls, and found everything he needed to build his drilling rig, including the pipe, sand point threaded connectors, driving caps, and materials to make the drilling rig itself including a DC motor, baseplate (used heavy truck flywheel with the right sized hole in the middle that he had 2 2-inch holes drilled and tapped for Pipe thread, 4 5-foot sections of pipe, and the pulley/axle assembly. He had Nick ask the Base Mechanic’s shop to fabricate the necessary parts and trial assemble it for him, in exchange for a 2 cases of beer. The chief in charge of the Mechanic’s shop loved doing stuff like that on the side, and was a well-renowned beer drinker, who did favors for guys on base like that all the time. He was intrigued when Josh explained why he wanted it, and asked Josh if he could make some copies. Josh said “Make all you want.” The next thing Josh knew, The Chief had a good little side business building small portable well drillers. Josh didn’t begrudge him the money, and was glad that the Chief was making a tidy profit on this project, because Josh knew he always needed stuff built, and the Chief would owe him a bunch of favors for the money he was making from Josh’s simple design. He had the Chief make another drilling rig for him and put 1 in each trailer, along with 100 feet of draft tubing for each pump setup.

The next weekend, Josh took everything out into the desert again, and after Sheila suggested at spot for him to try, Josh assembled the drilling rig, connected it to the trailer power supply, and started it. Every 4 feet, he stopped the machine long enough to add more pipe, and was soon 20

feet down. He dropped a weighted string down the hole, and 6 inches of the string were wet, so he decided to drill another 10 feet, and see how wet the string got. 2 sections and almost 2 hours later, he was down 30 feet, and he dropped another weighted string down the hole, and 3 feet of it were wet. He shut off the machine, dropped the draft hose down the hole, and flipped the switch that turned on the pump. 2 minutes later the discharge hose was pumping excess water, which looked pretty good to him. Half an hour later, he had 5 gallons of RO water in the output tank. He tested the discharge water, and realized it was perfectly good, at least for PH, and he could assume any water 30 feet underground wouldn't be biologically contaminated. He needed to re-plumb his system so he could switch between a standard pleated spun fiber filter and a carbon filter, or his Reverse Osmosis system, which wasted way too much water if the source was deep underground and not contaminated by salt, heavy metals, or anything else.

He packed back up and drove home to fix things. He bought 10 sand points and twice as much pipe, connectors, and driving caps as he thought he needed, then put half of the sand points in each trailer, and split the pipe, connectors and caps between the two trailers. He found a Y connector with a valve and a Culligan water filter system that would work perfectly. It would filter 3,000 gallons between replacements, used a simple tool to open the case and replace filters, and combined a pleated filter and an activated carbon center element. It was rated for everything except viruses. He knew the RO unit could handle viruses, so he bought 2 filter housings, the connectors needed to plumb it into his filter system, and 20 filters. He never would use that many in the foreseeable future, but it was better to have and not need, than need and not have. Besides, the trailer was huge, and they'd only managed to fill half of it when they did their practice Bug out the last weekend. Their stored food would take more room, but that still left a bunch of room, and water or filters wasn't something you wanted to run out of in the outback.

With that out of the way, Josh remembered he needed fuel storage and hangar space in Brisbane, which was almost half way toward Sheila's parents station just northeast of Alice Springs. He called the Airport Manager in Brisbane, who said they had a huge hangar on the far end of the field that no one bothered, it was left over from WWII, and had been refurbished 5 years ago for some celebration or another, and was available. Josh asked about fuel, etc. and he said they had a fuel farm with 50,000 gallons of jet fuel. Josh asked if he had any problems with him installing his own private tanks. He told Josh that as long as he purchased the hangar outright, they wouldn't care what he did, as long as it didn't affect other hangars, cause an objectionable noise after dark, or an objectionable odor. Josh asked him what they wanted for the hangar, and he said \$50,000. Josh said he'd fly up there the next day to check it out, and if he liked it, he'd buy it. The manager gave him instructions for locating the hangar after he landed, and Josh said he'd be there first thing tomorrow morning.

Later that afternoon, Josh got a call from Nick. The Real Estate agent wanted them to check the property, then sign the offers they had made on the property. Nick drove home, and they drove in Josh's Hummer to the Real Estate Agent's office, who gave them directions to the properties. Half an hour out of town, and up a hill was a small valley full of farms raising sheep and produce. They were glad they were on the upwind end of the valley, because Sheila had once

told Josh that if he ever got downwind of a flock of sheep, he'd never want to be downwind of them again. He made sure that he asked the realtor about the wind direction, and if he could provide a wind map that not only showed prevailing wind direction, but how often the wind reversed itself. He said he had one in his office he could show him. They liked the lots, they were big, flat, and already had deep wells that tied into the aquifer, which had been recently tested and passed with flying colors. Josh took that with a grain of salt. With all those farms around, he could imagine the ground water was well saturated with all kinds of stuff he didn't want to drink, then he remembered the filters, and realized if he hooked several up at his house, he'd have much better tasting and probably safer water.

When they got back to the office, they found out by looking at the legal descriptions that Josh's lot was actually 10.5 acres, and Nick's was 10.75 acres. There were no restrictions on the lots since they were zoned for agricultural use. Josh took a look at the wind map, and realized that 10% of the time, the wind reversed, but it was during stormy periods, and hopefully the sheepherders would have the sheep under cover, or in a different location. Josh talked to Sheila, and then they signed their cash offer for \$50,000, and once Nick saw them signing, he signed too, then signed paperwork selling his old house with a 6-month Escrow to allow plenty of time to build their new houses. The realtor told Nick that if their houses were finished sooner, Nick could close early and get his payment in full. Once the offers were accepted, Nick and Josh contacted contractors and engineers, and showed them Ralph's plans. Finally their third engineer and contractor said they'd love to build the building, which was similar to some commercial buildings they had built, with a facade to make it appear like a conventional house. He couldn't understand why they wanted to dig the basements so deep until Josh made 2 points crystal clear: 1) They were so rich that the money didn't matter, and 2) Josh was an ex-SEAL and wanted to make sure the basement would be proof against fall-out or a small nuke more than 10 miles away, like if it hit Sydney. The contractor gulped, since his main office was in a downtown Sydney Skyscraper. He said he'd work up a quote and get back to them. Several things they wanted would take some figuring, but he was sure he could get his engineer to certify this design for 2psi over-pressure.

Josh flew up to Brisbane between the realtor and contractor meetings, liked what he saw, and paid \$50,000 for the building and the land underneath it, then contracted the local fuel distributor to install a 5,000 gallon underground tank full of stabilized JP-5, and he said that JP-5 was stabilized by the manufacturer for at least 5 years of storage. Next he had him install a 2,000 gallon diesel tank, and make sure the diesel was stabilized with Pri-D for storage. When Josh showed him the Allakaket Airlines paperwork, he checked, and the tail number of Josh's plane was registered to Allakaket Airlines, so he quickly cut his figures in half, and estimated half the time to install everything he was going to. Josh's request to disguise the tank's locations and the fill tubes was highly irregular, but he went along with it when he realized that the SuperGoose would make a great plane to leave Australia in if someone had to leave in a hurry. The fuel distributor was into preparedness, and had already paid a large sum of money to protect his fuel tanks from RPG's. Someone might have called him paranoid before 09/11, but with Indonesia just a short hop away, his fuel tanks would have been an easy target, and would have leveled

much of Brisbane with just a couple of RPG's. With that out of the way, Josh flew home for dinner, then met the next day with the contractor.

1 week later, the contractor called, saying he had engineering approval for his design, and a hard quote. Josh wanted him to dig down 25 feet, backfill to 22 feet with gravel and compact, then pour a reinforced concrete floor 8 inches thick, then pour walls 12 feet high, and 6 inches thick, steel reinforced, then 3 interior walls of reinforced concrete with steel beams to carry the load of the 6-inch roof, 8 feet of dirt, plus a 3,000 square foot house made of reinforced concrete with glued-on siding, a fireproof roof on top of the 6-inch concrete roof with Thin-film solar Shingles on the southern exposure of the roof. In the basement they were going to install a huge Outback Power Systems Grid interconnect system. With the liberal AE credits in Australia, Josh could make most of the installation costs back, so he went overkill, and built a system capable of handling a 300-amp load, or a 36KWH capacity. At 2500 watts each, that was a huge system of inverters and controls, so he contacted Outback directly, and one of their application engineers put it together for him. Josh told him he wanted 2 identical systems, and price was no object, but reliability was. He suggested several upgrades that weren't available to the general public, but with a system as big as his, he would need them. He told Josh that if it were his system, and it was installed in his basement, he'd go with AGM batteries, and he thought the Optima deep cycles were the best, but he shipping to Australia would be pretty high. Josh asked if they could co-ordinate shipping with Optima so they could all travel in the same shipping container, it would reduce his costs and headaches. He told Josh that they had everything in stock, so all they needed was to contact Optima for the batteries. Josh suggested that Outback secure the batteries from Optima and bill him, or better yet, he'd wire transfer the money once he received the bill of lading from the shipper. He highly suggested shipping the order insured. He called his manager, who got on the line, and asked for half up front. Josh replied he'd only pay up front for the Optima batteries unless they were willing to pay for expedited shipping. The manager knew that expedited shipping cost over \$1,000 more than standard sea shipment, but he was talking about at least half a million dollars worth of equipment. He told Josh if he pre-paid by wire transfer, they'd pay for expedited sea shipment, and ship the order from Optima with it. That would save Josh anywhere from several days to a week in shipping time. He asked the factory manager to e-mail his wire-transfer info to his e-mail address, and he'd authorize the bank to wire transfer the funds as soon as he had a complete and itemized invoice via e-mail. He put the engineer back on, who told Josh that he'd have the order finished by tomorrow, and the invoice would be e-mailed by close-of-business that day.

Josh was glad he was so filthy stinking rich, the quote he got for the house was almost half a million, the AE systems were going for around \$100 thousand each plus shipping, and they hadn't even priced out the furniture or appliances. Then again, he had most of his \$25 million invested and returning over a million per year, plus a salary of \$250,000 per year. His dad was also making regular disbursements to his trust fund, as well as his brothers and sisters. The last time he talked to his Dad, he was worth almost \$250 Million, not including what he could sell Allakaket Airlines for. His dad had been very smart with his investments, and all the money he invested was starting to increase in value geometrically. Several businesses had located to

Allakaket once the last boom had started, and tourism was at a record pace. He had to double the number of SuperGoose aircraft flying all over Alaska, and they had also doubled the capacity of the airport to include ramp space for all the small pilots flying tourists throughout Alaska on photo safaris, and Bill had doubled the size of the Inn again. They added an extra turbogenerator to the geothermal power plant due to the expanding town. Seems instead of growing up and moving away like they did in most Northern Alaskan villages, the children were growing up, getting good jobs, getting married, and raising families in Allakaket. He told Josh that he might not recognize the place the next time he saw it.

Ron told Josh that Doc had suffered a major stroke, and might not live much longer. Josh asked if they should fly home for the funeral. It was a 18-hour flight via commercial, or 14-hour via charter jet if they could charter a high-speed jet with trans-continental range that had the range to make Hawaii easily. Ron said he'd keep Josh posted, but he'd do some checking into the charter jet, since he was sure that he could afford it. Ron was more affected by the serious illness of Doc than he admitted. Doc had become more than a friend over his lifetime, almost a father figure in his later years, since Roy was long dead, and he was too close in age to Gene.

2 days later, Josh got the dreaded call. Not only did Doc die, but his long-time butler and companion Nelson died from a heart attack from all the stress. They wanted to do the funeral that weekend, which meant that they'd have to fly charter, since it was faster. Josh asked his Dad to e-mail the details, and he needed to go tell Sheila. Sheila liked old Doc, but barely knew him, and wondered why he wanted to go.

"My Dad is awfully torn up about this. He and Doc go way back. I'll tell you on the flight over. Make sure you pack several days worth of clothes, and pack something warm. It's fall up there, and it gets cold early. I just wanted to be there for my Dad."

"Ok, I'll start packing stuff right now. What about our guns?"

"Bring them, we still have Federal CCW's and Australian permits. Just the P-14's, I think we can leave the Uzis at home!" Sheila giggled, Josh was always such a tease.

5 minutes later, the E-mail server beeped. Ron had located a Charter service with a Gulfstream V, with a 6500nm cruise range and a cruising speed of 450-500 knots, it could make it to Anchorage in 1 hop, and take 14 hours. The best news was it was configured for VIP travel with 8 seats, a dining/conference area, and a 3-seater couch that converts into a bed. They were going to fly it to Georgia for scheduled Annual Maintenance anyway, so the agreed to only charge them for the extra fuel to fly to Anchorage. They'd be back 4 days later to fly them back to Australia. Sheila saw the word "bed" and started giggling, remembering the last time they flew a charter jet, and she was all alone with her Husband this time!

Chapter 82 - The Very Friendly Skies

Josh packed quickly, then they went to bed. The next morning Sheila suggested that Josh drink a lot of water, and he knew he was in trouble. He skipped the morning coffee, and made sure he was well hydrated before they left. Nick dropped them off at the airport, and since it was a charter, they went to the General Aviation side of the airport without the screening equipment. They were met at the Gulfstream V by the pilot and copilot. The pilot introduced himself, and shook their hands. He hoped it was OK if they left the stewards behind on this trip. Sheila quipped that she doubted they would need anything during the flight except privacy. The pilot said they had stored enough food and beverages for 3 meals each plus snacks in the small galley, and they could help themselves. He said that they could lock the privacy door between the cockpit and passenger cabin, leaving them a small galley and head for the pilot's use, so they'd have the rest of the cabin to themselves. Since the trip to Anchorage would be near their maximum unrefueled range, leaving the stewards and excess baggage off the plane would allow them to load the fuel tanks to 100% capacity, giving them another 1000nm of range at 500 knots, which would easily put them within FAA limits of a non-stop routing to Anchorage. Josh and Sheila told them they were both commercial pilots, and they were flying to Anchorage for a funeral in Allakaket.

"Did you say Allakaket, I have a friend that just accepted a job flying for Allakaket Airlines."

"That's my Dad's airline. Our SuperGoose is owned by the airline, and I'm still on the books as a pilot for the airline so they can write off the fuel and maintenance costs on the SG."

"Must be nice to be able to fly that sweet airplane that often."

"If you want to see her, and take a check ride, it's hangared over at the RAAF base, either ask for me, Josh Williams, or Commander Nick Klaus, my project manager."

"Thanks Josh I might just do that! I'd like to get a nice cushy job flying a short-hop commuter like that."

"It's not that easy, you also have to land on water, and in an emergency, you have to be capable of setting it down on a lake just slightly bigger than a mile long, and half a mile wide that might have anywhere between 200-500 foot obstructions within a mile."

"That's a bloody steep approach."

"The SuperGoose is designed and built to do it. It's got fantastic STOL capability with the twin Allison reversing turboprops and the high wing."

"I'm Definitely going to have to take you up on that check ride now! Ok, go ahead and get on

board, we'll fuel this baby as full as we can get and do the walk-around."

Josh and Sheila carried their baggage on board, since they had way more room than they needed. Sheila quickly made the bed while they were fueling and checking out the aircraft. Once they were ready to take off, the pilots came on the intercom. "You two have to be in seats with your seatbelts fastened for take-off." Josh and Sheila took their seats, and buckled their belts as the plane rolled toward the runway. Finally the plane made a sharp turn and came to a complete stop. Seconds later, they heard the engines spooling up to take-off power, and were amazed at how quiet they were inside the cabin. Gulfstream must have paid a fortune for the insulating and sound deadening material in the cabin walls. They could easily carry on normal conversations while the engines were screaming at 100% power outside. The pilot released the brakes, and they quickly accelerated to take-off speed. Josh could tell when they took off, because the plane took an aggressive nose-up attitude suddenly. Just as soon as they were flying, and had everything cleaned up, the pilot throttled back to cruise climb, he needed to conserve fuel. He thought Josh might appreciate the max performance take-off, but they didn't have the fuel to spare. Once they were comfortably cruising, the pilot took off the seatbelts sign, and Sheila said that if Josh wasn't in the bed in 30 seconds, she was going to start without him.

14 hours later, Josh looked and felt like he'd been through Hell Week all over again. He was sore all over, and whatever wasn't sore was numb. He drank a lot of water and ate his first meal in 14 hours, and tried to make himself presentable. Josh got one whiff of himself, and decided to take advantage of the shower, and was glad there wasn't enough room for Sheila in there. He took a quick shower, to make sure he saved enough water for Sheila. When he walked back into the bedroom, she was still asleep, laying on her back with a huge grin on her face. Josh looked at his beautiful sleeping wife, and was filled with love for her. He hoped that soon she'd be the mother of his children. Secretly he hoped that she had gotten pregnant during this flight. They'd been married 6 months, and he didn't know why she wasn't pregnant yet. They were doing everything right, and the doctor said that everything was fine with him. He decided that the best thing he could do about it was to pray, then he realized he hadn't been praying, or even thinking about God for a long time, and he was very remorseful, and promised himself when they got back to Australia to locate a good church, and get right with God again, after all they'd soon have a family to care for, and children to raise. It was time to stop acting like Peter Pan and start acting like an adult. He realized his life had been compartmentalized for so long that he'd matured only as much as it was needed for him to be the best SEAL he could be. Now he needed to grow up spiritually so he could be the best father and husband he could be. Sheila woke up to her husband sitting on the foot of the bed looking at her with a blank look. As she slid out from under the covers, Josh realized she was awake, and feasted his eyes on her nude body. Somehow a satisfied woman was very erotic, at least in Josh's eyes. Josh and Sheila made eye contact, and something passed between them. She slipped out from under the covers, slipped into one of Josh's tee shirts and stood to give him a hug. "I love you dear, thanks for marrying me and loving me. I know we've been trying for a while, and I found out why I wasn't getting pregnant. I've been on the pill for years, and just stopped when we got married. The doc said that it could take 6 months for everything to return to normal so I can get pregnant. It's

been 6 months, so hopefully I'll be pregnant soon, because I really want to bear your children." They tearfully embraced, then Josh said he made sure to leave enough water for her to take a shower. Sheila thought it wouldn't be such a hot idea to meet the in-laws for a funeral in the state she was in, so she padded off to the bathroom while Josh got dressed. She finished in the bathroom 10 minutes before they were to land, and got dressed quickly. They got seated right when the "fasten seatbelts" sign lit, indicating they were landing, and when the plane taxied up to the VIP area, Jake was standing there waiting for them.

"Josh, dad's kind of torn up, and asked if I could pick up you guys. Hope you don't mind."

"I kind of figured that this would hit dad harder than he let on. Doc's practically been a Father figure to him. Jake climbed up front, and Josh and Sheila settled into the nice comfortable leather VIP seats for the short ride home. When they got home, his entire family was waiting there to greet them. Josh immediately noticed his dad looked almost 10 years older since the wedding. He hoped it was temporary due to the grief of losing Doc. His mom looked pretty good considering, and he was glad to see his nieces and nephews. They car pooled back to the house, where they all got together for a reunion of sorts. They were reminiscing about Doc and later Sam, Ralph, and their kids showed up. Bert and Larry seemed to really miss their "grandpa", and Sam looked like she'd spent most of the day crying. Ralph took Ron aside, and said that Bill had already delivered Doc's will, leaving all his money to him and Sam, with huge trust funds for Bert and Larry. Ralph said he'd rather have Doc back. Ron told him he felt exactly the way he did when his "grandpa" Jim died. Ron took a minute to tell Ralph about Jim, and Ralph realized they both had something in common. Ron put his hands on Ralph's shoulders and prayed with him. They both felt peace and a sense of closure, like they'd both see Jim and Doc again. Ralph told Ron that he had better spend some more time with Anne and Gene, since Gene wasn't doing too good, and his mom was a candidate for a stroke. Ordinarily such conversations violated doctor-patient privilege, but Ralph realized that Anne probably was too worried about Gene, and not paying attention to her health. Ron thanked Ralph, and they went back into the living room to join the crowd. Finally someone suggested adjourning to Doc's Lodge, since there wasn't going to be funeral in accordance with Doc's wishes, and he'd already been cremated. Ralph and Sam thought it was an excellent idea, and they drove to the airport. Gene, Anne, Bear and Mary took the 007. Ron and Nancy flew one of the SuperGoose with 8 passengers, Ralph and Sam took another, and they had room for 6 more, Jake and Josh both piloted a SuperGoose, and the other 007 carried anyone that was left. They lined up and flew in formation to HelpMeJack lake, where Ron touched down first, and the rest of the aircraft followed him down at a safe interval. Once they were all on the lake, the 007's dropped off their passengers, and got out of the way, then the planes taxied up to the lodges and unloaded. Once they were all inside, they passed out sparkling cider, and they drank a toast to Doc.

Sam started "Here's to one of the kindest men on the planet - thanks for giving me a new life!"

Then Ralph said "Thanks for everything Doc, Merci Beaucoup!"

Then Ron said “Doc, I’m going to miss you, but I know you’re with Bert again, and I’ll see you again. Thanks for believing in me!”

Bert held up his glass and said “Bye Grandpa!” then Larry did the same as his older brother.

Finally Samantha held up her glass and said “Here’s to Doc!” and they all drank in his memory.

Later Ron and Ralph walked outside, and Ralph said “I can’t believe how much money Doc had accumulated. When Bill finished tallying up everything, Doc’s estate was worth almost \$200 million, not including his share of the ownership of Doc’s lodge. He gave it to me with instructions to keep it open, and maintain the status quo. I know you and Doc were close, and the place has made money for both of you, so I’m going to bow to his wishes and keep the place open as a lodge. It’s just got too many memories for me right now. Maybe when the pain of missing him goes away, I’ll be able to come up here again. I wanted to ask you if you wanted to buy me out, but Doc told me not to - there’s some stuff about this lodge I don’t know about.”

“Ralph, remember the setup you had in your Anchorage basement? Under the hangar is an emergency shelter stocked for 10 years of self-sufficient survival including food, water, medicine, and everything you’d need to survive. Bear helped Doc design the ultimate bug-out shelter, and from what I saw, he succeeded. We’ve got one similar to yours right under our lodge. If the stuff hits the fan, get to the lake, and get to your hangar. Bear built a fallout and blast shelter under there, and the 3 of us are the only people who know about it. Your family would be safer in there than in your home bunker, since this would be much harder to find. The keys to the lodge include a key to the bunker. Once you’re inside, and seal the door, it’s a blast door, and would take a huge explosion for someone to get at you. There’s plenty of game for both our families, and our grandkids.”

“Thanks Ron. I’m glad you feel that way. By the way, I never did thank you for saving Sam’s life. Sam told me you probably still love her, but you’re not in love with her.”

“Samantha and I will always be close, but not ever more than friends, but I’d do anything short of hurting my wife and family to help Sam and your family.”

Ralph stuck his hand out and told Ron that he’d do the same for Ron and his family.

They went back inside the lodge, and the gathering was winding down, and Ron said that they needed to start heading home if they wanted to land with good daylight. When they agreed, he called the airport, who said the choppers were waiting for them parked by the lake. Ron told them to come on in, they were ready to go.

On the way out, Ron stopped his mom. “Mom, is there anything I should know?”

“Not really son, your mom’s getting old, and Gene is really getting old. We’re alright.”

“Mom, I just wanted to tell you I love you!”

Ron leaned into his Mom, and burst into tears. “I just lost Doc, I don’t want to loose you too!”

“I’m not going anywhere dear!”

“Ralph told me that you were so worried about Gene that you were working yourself into a stroke. PLEASE mom, take it easy. If you need some help, just ask. Both Nancy and I are retired for all practical purposes, and can do stuff for you or Gene.”

“We’re not a couple of frail old people just yet. Ralph’s just like all the rest of the doctors, they worry too much. No one lives forever, and I want to enjoy what time I have left with Gene.”

“Ok Mom, but if you need me, I’m right here, and I love you!”

“I love you too son, but we’ve got a helicopter to catch.”

Ron gave his mom one last hug before he let her go, and helped her out to the waiting chopper. Once the choppers were clear, they loaded up the airplanes and taxied out to the lake.

The mood after the flight home was somber, and finally Bear had to resolve the tension.

“Any of you guys want to go shooting at the range tomorrow? I’m going to break out some Full-auto stuff for you to play with!”

That suggestion could have resurrected the dead, and the resulting pandemonium indicated that he better get some more ammunition out of the Armory. He had a cool idea, and decided to take some of his personal weapons out of his collection, and let everyone shoot them. He had a real surprise for them waiting for when it got dark that night!

The next day Bear, Tom, and Gary, along with Hunter’s kids, were busy transporting junk to the shooting range for targets, hauling cases of belted ammo and cases of ammo for the rifles and subguns. At noon everyone started arriving, and Bear gathered them around the conference table to do his safety indoctrination. The range would be hot all afternoon, and there would be no one going downrange unless it was him and an absolute emergency. All the weapons, with the exception of the M-16a2 rifles with the 3-round burst were full auto, and you really had to pay attention to muzzle climb. All of his subguns were suppressed, but since they were firing belt-fed and various non-suppressed rifles, eye and ear protection would be worn at all times.

He started with the M-16a2, showed everyone how to work it, then issued 1 to everyone who wasn’t in the Militia (basically all the kids - Bear believed that the .223 poodle shooter, with it’s neutered 3-round burst trigger, was only fit for kids, or your average draftee Army puke that couldn’t hit anything outside of 100 yards anyway.) Once they were set up on the 100-yard line,

he showed everyone else what he had for them to shoot. He had the rest of the .45 Mini-Uzi's left at MacDill (minus the ones he'd given to Josh and others), dozens of H&K MP-5/10-SD subguns, and from his personal collection, a Czech 7.62x25mm Skorpion, a Sten MK V, a Soviet PPSH-41 7.62x25 and several 75-round drums full of com-bloc ammo for it. Next he showed them his personal Ingram MAC-10 in .45acp. Just in case anyone was interested, he had several Yugoslavian AK-47s and cases of 7.62x39 ammo for them. Josh grabbed a pair of the .45 Mini-Uzis, since this would be a good time to teach Sheila how to shoot it, since the fastest way to draw attention to yourself in the outback was to fire full-auto all afternoon. He picked up 20 30-rd mags and started loading them, then carried them to Bear's Subgun range, which was set up for 25 yard maximum. He taught Sheila trigger control, and explained that the Uzi was much more accurate when you limited yourself to 3-round bursts, even with the suppressor. After a couple of magazines, Sheila was getting the hang of just tapping the trigger, instead of squeezing it like a rifle or pistol, which would usually result in her emptying the magazine. Next he worked on her accuracy, since the Uzi had primitive sights at best. With the suppressor mounted, the normal sights were almost totally obscured, so he had to teach her instinctive shooting. For having never fired the UZI, she was getting pretty good at it by the end of the day.

Meanwhile, Jake and Sarah's kids were all on the 100 yard line with their M-16a2's, having the time of their lives. Jake's and Diane's kids Dan (12), Rebecca (10), Samuel (8), and John (5) Had shot guns since they were old enough to shoot them. John was the youngest competitive shooter in the Youth Shooting League, and was a VERY mature 5-year old. He wanted to do everything his older brothers and sister did, so Jake couldn't really tell him no. John learned very quickly, and was a very serious shooter. He shot Jake's old tricked-out 10/22 in the Youth shooting league, and was soon the top shooter in the 12 and under category. He loved shooting the scoped AR-15 when Jake was with them at Bear's place, and he treated the M-16a2 like the AR-15, except for 1 magazine that Jake let him fire in 3-round burst mode. John told his dad that he thought the 3-round burst mode was a waste of ammo. If you killed the target with the first round, you didn't need the 2 others. Jake smiled and thought "Spoken like a true sharpshooter, just like his dad!" Samuel wasn't as good of a shot as his younger brother, but he was smart as a tack, and Jake thought he might have inherited his grandpa's vision, because he could spot stuff much further away than Jake could. Rebecca was at that awkward age between teenager and child, yet Jake loved her deeply, and was probably the closest to his daughter of all his kids. She reminded him of Sarah, who could go from cute little girl to tomboy so fast it made his head hurt. Dan was the "grownup" of his kids, and helped doing adult things like felling and splitting wood, and he'd already shot his first caribou. When Jake saw him gutting the caribou with his Mom's Ulu, he knew that he must have been listening to his Mom, because Jake remembered his first caribou, and the poor job he'd done skinning and gutting it. Dan was the oldest kid shooting the M-16a2, but he didn't mind, since he was looking out for his younger siblings.

Sarah and Neil's kids Rachael (11), Russell (9), Robert (7) and Rebecca(4) came with them, but Robert and Rebecca were with their mom, since Robert wasn't into guns yet, and Rebecca was too young. Rachael and Russell were doing OK on the 100 yard line, but weren't as good shots

as Jake's kids, probably because they had started shooting much later. Neil was a pretty good shot with his HBAR Bushmaster AR-15 on the 300-yard line, but was shooting with Rachael and Russell on the 100-yard line to try and encourage them. David and Isabel were there, and they were shooting too. Josh thought something was odd about his younger brother, but he couldn't put his finger on it. He seemed dominated by Isabel, and didn't seem to be really into guns like his other siblings. Josh realized his brother was more sensitive and in touch with his feelings, and was just different.

BA and Sally were there with their kids and their grandkids. Mike and Jill were both married, and had 2 kids each. Jill was pregnant with #3, so she wasn't shooting. Jill's husband Jack, on the other hand, was really into hunting and shooting. He worked with Jake at the lodge, as was as good of a guide as Jake. With Ron looking to retirement, he was grooming Jake to take over the airline, so Jake was grooming Jack to take over guiding and flying at the lodge. He was studying for his commercial license so he could fly customers back and forth to the lodge as well. BA was spending more and more time with Jake, tutoring him on the ins and outs of the business world. Bill had totally retired, and was in the process of selling the Inn to Mike, who had a head for business like his dad. BA was so rich that he could buy the inn for cash and not hurt his investments, so he was negotiating with his son to buy the inn, and have his son pay him back out of the profits. Ron had talked to Sarah and Neil, and decided to groom Neil to run the mine when Bear retired in a few years. Ron wanted Josh to take over running the Survival School from Bear, but now he had a 5-year contract to consult with the RAAF in Australia. Ron thought he could use that to their advantage, and offer the RDF the use of the survival school for training like the US, Canada, and several other countries were. Since Josh was a former SEAL officer, he had the credentials to run the place. Hunter's sons were trained by their Dad, and were in the process of taking over some training programs from their dad, who was getting long in the tooth. Since the Survival School was a mature program, with established contracts, all they needed was someone to run the place, and a SEAL Officer would make a nice image for the head of the school. Bear and Ron decided that Bear would approach Josh before he left for Australia.

While the kids shot the M-16a2, most of the adults wanted to try the Belt fed machine guns. Ron was first behind the M-60, and after a few bursts was able to easily control the trigger, and send short bursts into each of the targets ranging from 300-1,000 yards on the range. Diane got behind the M-249 SAW, and after getting everything figured out, was putting short bursts into the targets between 100-400 yards. Bear was impressed that she was picking it up so fast, and remembered that she was Jake's sniper partner, so she probably had enough practice with the M-25 and the scoped AR-15 to make shooting the SAW off the bipod a walk in the park. Nancy decided to try the M-60 next, and was a pretty good shot too. By the time it was starting to get dark, Bear brought out his personal "toy" - A GE Minigun converted to fire .223 rounds, since they had millions of them. Bear must have seen Predator to even think about converting a GE minigun to a backpack man-portable weapon. Normally 1,000 rounds of .223 ammo would be a heavy load, but Bear had built a 2,000 round backpack and a flexible feed just like the movie. At 6,000 rpm, the 2,000 round pack wouldn't last long, but with every 10th round a tracer, it

would make a cool light show! Once everyone was clear of the firing line, he picked up the gun, and walked to the firing line. Once he was sure it was safe, he flipped the safety, which powered the motors. All he had to do was squeeze the trigger, and watch the light show. He pointed the gun at a wrecked car body, squeezed the trigger, and wrecked it some more. Next he fired at an old refrigerator, and turned it into a shredded wreck with a short burst. He had put an old Ford pickup on the far side of the line, and so far the only bullet holes in it were from Ron's firing the M -60 at it. Unknown to Ron, there was a gallon gas container in the bed, which Bear ignited with his second burst, resulting in "4th of July" fireworks as the truck burned. When Bear was finally out of ammo, he said "Sorry people, show's over!" and they packed everything up and went back into Bear's lodge. Bear took Josh aside, and talked to him.

"Josh, I need you to do me and your dad a favor. I'm getting too old to run this school, and I'm thinking about retiring. I know you just signed a 5-year contract, and I can wait that long, but I need you back in Alaska once the contract's finished to pick up the reins here. The school is in great shape, with repeat business from all over the world. You could teach any classes you wanted to, but what I really need is an administrator. The fact that you're a former SEAL officer doesn't hurt either. Your Dad's already grooming Josh to take over the Airline, and Neil and Sally are going to run the mine, so you're the best qualified of his kids to run the survival school. You'll never need to think about money again, since your dad is accelerating the deposit schedule into your trusts, so the IRS won't get it all. Last time I talked with him, your dad was worth over \$200 million conservatively, and his investments are returning \$40 million per year. He decided to increase the trust fund deposits to \$15 million per year, and eventually he'll have to double that to \$30 if the market keeps going up."

"Bear, it's never been about the money. I'm honored that you wanted me to run your school. You're right, I'm tied into a 5-year contract, but Sheila's already said she wants to move to Alaska, so as soon as the contract's up, we're coming back. Just hold down the fort for another 4 years. Thanks Bear!"

"Make sure you talk to your Dad before you leave, he's trying to coordinate the 3 of you taking over the company so he can retire."

"Three of us, what about David?"

"He's not interested in the "responsibility" and is happy with the money in his trust fund. Just to be on the safe side, BA has advised Ron to totally cut Isabel out of the loop since she's got David totally dominated and BA doesn't trust her as far as he can throw her. He even went so far as to suggest that Ron not make David an officer in the company, and place his money in an air-tight trust fund that she can't get hold of."

"That's pretty severe - why did BA suggest that?"

"BA's got a nose for Barracudas, and Isabel has Barracuda written all over her. She didn't even

bother to change her name, and she's got David so dominated that he can't fart without her permission."

Josh started to laugh, then just shook his head. He knew it was probably pointless to talk to his brother, he'd just think his older brother was interfering, and make a bad situation worse. He agreed with BA's suggestions, and told Bear he'd talk with his Dad soon.

Later that evening, before they went to bed, Josh met his Dad in his study.

"Dad, I talked to Bear, and I agreed to run the Survival School. I'm pretty much in agreement with BA about the situation with David, but I need your advice."

"Josh, I've had years to study the problem, and I still can't come to a good decision. I can't disinherit my son just because he married a barracuda. David said he was happy running his Graphic Arts business, and all he wanted was the money in the trust fund. He told me he had no interest in flying hunting or mining, and he was busy enough with his business. I think part of the problem is Isabel has him so thoroughly dominated that he can't fart without her permission - that was a pretty accurate quote of BA's and I thought it was funny as hell until I realized he was talking about my youngest son. Nancy and I talked about it, and she blamed herself for being too "mothering" and overprotective of David. If she would have known this was going to happen to him, she would have booted his butt out the door on his 18th birthday and made him fend for himself, and learn some independence."

"Dad, there's no way you or mom could have known. Hopefully once Isabel figures out she can't touch David's money, she'll leave him and he can rebuild his life."

"Son, that's a hard way to resolve the issue, but I think you're right. I've already signed the paperwork putting all his disbursements into an irrevocable trust, and removing him from all connections to the Corporation. BA's lawyer claims that the contract is so airtight that F. Lee Bailey wouldn't try to change it. I've included a proviso that if the 3 of you vote unanimously to rescind the trust, he'd be fully restored. You understand that the ONLY time you should ever consider it is if David gets his act together, and isn't living with a barracuda. I highly doubt you should, but I left that option just in case David comes to his senses. Make sure you hurry back, Bear's getting older by the day."

"Dad, I'm worried about you - when I saw you yesterday, you looked like you'd aged 10 years since our wedding."

"I'm pretty sure it was the stress of losing Doc. Ralph said I was fine at my last physical, and if I keep going the way I'm going, I'll have at least another good 10-20 years. You and Sheila enjoy your stay in Australia. You might consider keeping your house in Sydney in case you want to go back there for vacation, like winter, or if you want to retire there."

Josh started laughing. “Hey, we could be the Ultimate Snowbirds. Summer in Alaska, Winter in Australia!” Josh gave his dad a hug, then went and joined Sheila in bed. The next morning, the charter company called, and said their jet was finished with their scheduled maintenance, and they’d be in Anchorage 6 hours after they took off at 0900 local. Georgia was 4 hours ahead of Alaska, and it was 6am Alaska Standard Time. That meant they’d been in the air for an hour, which gave them 5 hours to get to Anchorage. Since it was a 2-hour flight via SuperGoose, they needed to get packed and out the door in 3 hours. He told Sheila to get showered and packed, they had to be in Anchorage in 5 hours to meet their ride home. Josh told his Mom and Dad they would have to cut it short to catch their flight, and Ron said it was OK, and he was glad he got to see them again, even under the circumstances. Josh gave his Mom and Dad a big hug, and said he’d see them in the next 4 years, if not sooner. Sheila just got out of the shower when Josh got in, so he smacked her playfully on the rump on his way in. She yelped and blew him a kiss. Josh made sure that he drank a lot of water with breakfast after he got out of the shower. They left the house with 20 minutes to spare. Jake was going to fly them to Anchorage and pick up a load of hunters on the way back with the VIP SuperGoose. When they got to the airport, the engines were already turning on the Goose, so Josh gave his Mom and Dad another quick hug, then they hugged Sheila, and they ran to the plane. Once they were in and seated, the ground crewman lifted and locked the air stair door, pulled the chocks out from under the wheels, and walked in front of the aircraft to show Jake he was good to go. Jake had already received take-off clearance, and as soon as the crewman was clear, he taxied to the lake and took off. As they taxied up to the VIP terminal, the Gulfstream came in for a landing. It taxied right up next to them, so Josh and Sheila just transferred from one aircraft to the other, and the ground crew closed and locked the doors of both aircraft. Jake taxied over to the General Aviation loading area, and the Gulfstream taxied to the fuel pumps, took on as much fuel as they could hold, then got take-off clearance, and took off bound for Australia.

Chapter 83 - Flying Home

Josh knew he was in for a long flight when Sheila started making the bed as soon as the cabin doors were secured. They got into their seats right as the plane started taxiing, and as soon as the seatbelt signs came off, so did Sheila's clothes! He knew she really wanted to get pregnant in the worst way when she moaned and said she hoped it would be twins. Josh realized that moments like this called for a cigarette, but neither of them smoked. For some reason Sheila was content to cuddle and talk the rest of the flight, which suited Josh just fine. When he woke up it was just turning light outside, so he knew they must have slept most of the flight. He rolled over to see the most beautiful sight in the world. His wife was sleeping quietly next to him and she had the most beautiful smile on her face. Josh hoped he had gotten her pregnant this time, and slid back in bed next to his sleeping wife and just held her. 2 hours later, they were both awake and hungry. Josh said he'd shower first, and warm it up for her, and make sure he left her plenty of water. She smiled sweetly and gave him a kiss, then he crawled out of bed before she had any other ideas since they should be landing in a few hours. Once he got out of the shower, he got dressed and Sheila walked past him to get into the shower. Josh decided to give her a hug, and said "Do you know how beautiful you are right now?"

"Right, my hair's a mess and I smell!"

"You still look beautiful to me. Soon you'll be the mother of my children. That makes you extra beautiful in my eyes."

Sheila gave Josh a rather passionate kiss, then Josh said she'd better get into the shower, or they might not get dressed in time. She reluctantly let Josh go, but not before telling him she was just taking a rain check for when they got home. Josh checked the galley for something to eat while Sheila took a quick shower. The galley had a microwave oven that was just big enough to heat two trays of what looked like eggs, sausage, hash and toast. There was a #1 tag on the tray, and he noticed there was a matching #1 button on the microwave's control pad. Evidently they had planned ahead, so Josh stuck the trays in the microwave, closed the door, and pressed the #1 button. 3 minutes later, the microwave dinged, and he opened the door, set the tray on the counter, and took the wrapping off. He spotted a coffee maker, checked to make sure there was coffee in the basket, and pressed the Brew button. 6 minutes later, he had 6 cups of fresh brewed coffee. The aroma filled the cabin, and Sheila came out in one of Josh's tee-shirts, saying she was too hungry to get dressed the rest of the way, she wanted to eat now. He set the trays down on the dinette, added 2 coffee mugs, and the place settings. Before they ate, Josh bowed his head and said Grace. Sheila thought this was an interesting development, and said Amen when he was finished. Judging by the portions, each tray was designed to feed 2 people, but they had no problems eating it all since they hadn't eaten anything in 14 hours. When she finished eating, she took off Josh's shirt and sashayed back to the bathroom to get dressed, making Josh wish he had another 4 hours of flight time. He decided instead to make her pay for that when they got home. 2 could play that game.

Once they landed an hour later, they were seated and presentable, or at least dressed. Nick met them at the airport, and saw the looks on their faces, and made his best time getting back home, then stayed out of their way. Nick hoped that his favorite Pizzeria had a special on delivery today, because he knew they wouldn't come out of their room until tomorrow. He wished he wasn't between girlfriends, then spent the next 30 minutes thinking about why he hadn't settled down like Josh and Sheila. It's not like he didn't have the opportunity. Finally he called up an old girlfriend that could have been "Mrs. Right" if he wasn't a confirmed bachelor, and talked with her. She had just broken up with her boyfriend, so she agreed to meet him for Pizza. She was a beautiful schoolteacher, who unlike his Playmates, had something going for her besides her looks. They spent the evening talking and laughing, and Nick came right out and asked her why they never got serious. She turned to him and said "Nick, I've always loved you, even when you were fooling around with those bimbos. I don't care about the money, I just wanted you. The last time we were dating was right after Tim died, and you were in no condition to make a commitment."

"Karen, I know I'm ready now. I see Josh and Sheila so happy together, and planning their future, and all I see is growing old and lonely. I've never had the nerve to ask you, but I'd like to live with you for 30 days, and if everything works out, I'd like to marry you."

"Nick that's the most unusual proposal I've ever heard. Are you sure you mean it?"

"I see the 30 days as an escape clause in case you decide you can't stand me. I've been a bachelor all my life, and I'm pretty set in my ways."

"As long as you clean up after yourself and leave the seat down, I can handle the rest."

"I'm building a house out in the country, right next to Josh and Sheila, well not right next- they're on adjacent 10-acre lots, and they both have an emergency shelter in the basement. I think I'd like to have kids if you wanted to."

"I've always wanted to have kids - especially yours!"

"So why didn't we do this years ago?"

"Nick, you weren't ready to settle down, your best friend had just died, and you were a depressed drunk. Still I loved you, but you didn't want me around."

"Well I do now - and forever!"

Karen kissed Nick, and he realized that he really did love her. His arms came around her shoulders, and he cried when he held her. Karen told him that she needed to give 30 days notice at her flat, or she'd lose her deposit.

“Sod the deposit - I just sold that old white elephant of a house of mine for \$100 million, you’ll never need money again.”

“Well in that case, if you can get tomorrow off, can you help me move in to your house?”

“Would you mind if Josh and Sheila helped?”

“I’ve never met Josh, but Sheila and I get along fabulously.”

“Josh is just like Tim, he just resigned from the US NAVY as a SEAL. He was a Lieutenant Commander right before he quit to marry Sheila.”

“Wow, I’ve never met an actual SEAL.”

“They’re just like the rest of us, except they’ve got a much tougher job, kind of like the Royal Marines during WWII.”

“Nick, could you take me to your house tonight. I want to spend the night with you.”

“Ok, can we finish our pizza first!”

Karen laughed, Nick really liked the sound of her laughter, and gave her another hug.

He drove her home later that evening, and found Josh and Sheila sitting on the couch watching a movie. Sheila stood up and hugged her old friend, and Nick introduced her to Josh as his Fiancé.

Sheila turned to Karen and said “How’d you get this old tomcat to settle down?”

Nick said “Actually it was living with you two. I never knew a married couple could be so happy together. All my parents did was fight.”

“Nick, the trick is to grow together, not apart. As Bill said at our wedding, if God’s in the middle of your marriage, and you’re both looking at him, you don’t see each other’s imperfections, you see them as God sees them.”

“Thanks Sheila, I’ll remember that. I wanted to ask you two if it’s OK if Karen lives here while our house gets built.”

“Nick, it’s your house. I guess this means we’ll have to wear clothes now!”

Nick realized Sheila was teasing him, and started laughing.

“Well, now that’s decided, Karen and I wanted to go to bed. Goodnight you two.”

“Don’t kill him Karen, he’s not as young as he used to be, or he thinks he is!”

Nick held his hand to his ear, like he couldn’t hear her, and said “Aye, you were saying?”

Everyone was laughing their heads off, and Nick took his chance to tear Karen away from them so he could have her all to himself. The next morning, he decided that Sheila was right, he wasn’t as young as he used to be. His arm was wrapped around Karen and they were both staring at the ceiling basking in the afterglow. She was the first one to speak. Dear, I don’t care if we can have kids or not, I love you so much right now I don’t ever want to leave your side.”

“What about work?”

“If we start having kids, I’ll quit my job, and spend all my time raising our kids. In another 5 years, you should have enough years in for full military retirement, then we’ll just have to think of something to do.”

“Hopefully outside of the bedroom, or else I’ll need a bigger house.”

Karen rolled over and kissed Nick rather passionately.

Later that afternoon, the 4 of them met in the dining area. Josh and Sheila were going up to see her parents that weekend, and asked Nick and Karen to come along. Josh told Nick they were planning on shooting his M -25 and maybe the M - 200.

Karen was confused and asked “what’s that?”

Nick said “A couple of bloody accurate rifles. The M -25 is twice as good as my Enfield, and Josh here can shoot a 3-inch group at 600 yards with it. The M -200 is an even bigger rifle made by Barrett’s. The RDF Special Forces used an older model in Desert Storm to destroy Scud missiles at over a mile. They’re thinking of buying the newer model, and Josh just happens to be an expert with it, so he’s working as a consultant for the RDF.”

“Bloody Hell, and I thought my Weatherby kicked like a mule.”

“Actually the M -200 kicks less than your average shotgun - it’s got a suppressor on it that also doubles as one heck of a muzzle brake. If you like, I’ll teach you to shoot it this weekend.”

Karen looked like Christmas had came early “Well, let’s get going!”

“Sheila’s got meetings the rest of this week, the soonest we can go is Saturday morning.”

“Ok, We’ll be ready to go bright and early.”

Saturday morning rolled around, and the 4 of them got into Josh's Hummer. Karen commented that it didn't look like any Hummer she'd seen.

"Dear, Josh built 2 armored Hummers, 1 for him, and 1 for Sheila, and 2 armored trailers."

"What for, we're perfectly safe here?"

"Right now, but almost anything could happen to disrupt that. Remember all the footage of the rioting in Indonesia. What if we were caught in the middle of that?"

Karen sat there thinking. The more she thought, the less she liked where her mind was taking her. Nick could see her walls of invulnerability crumbling, but it was for her own good.

"If that happened Sydney wouldn't be a very safe place."

"That's why we're moving out to the country. Josh gave me some plans for a house his friend Ralph built in Anchorage that could withstand a near miss and fallout."

"How could a house stand up to that?"

"Not necessarily the house, but the bunker underneath it. He designed a bunker that was 20 feet deep, 12 feet high, with 8 feet of dirt on top to shield it from fallout. The house itself is fireproof, and blast-resistant, and will stand up to anything less than a TOW missile."

"You guys planning on fighting WWII?"

"With a military base so close, if we want to survive, we'd have to assume the guys attacking us might have access to military weapons. Nick's house wouldn't survive your average band of hooligans, let alone someone with modern weapons. When he found out we were moving, and his house was worth \$100 million, he decided to move with us to a safer location."

"Ok, in that case, maybe you should buy an armored hummer too!"

Nick looked at Josh who shrugged his shoulders, he wasn't about to get into the middle of this discussion. Nick thought of a safe way out.

"Ok, if my Wing Commander says it's OK to drive on base, I'll get 1. If we need to, we might as well get 2."

"Great Nick, do you want me to call Q?"

"Who the heck is Q?"

Sheila chimed in “He’s the funny old codger that built both Hummers and our trailers. Obviously he’s seen 1 too many James Bond movies because he acts just like Q.”

“Well, let’s give the old codger a call!”

“Not so fast, I’ve got to talk to my Wing Commander on Monday.”

“Nick, you’ve got a cell phone, give him a call now while you’re thinking about it.”

“Yes Dear!”

Much as he thought it was a waste of money, he was rolling in it, and if he ever needed it, besides he had a wife to think about now, and maybe some kids. Also, there was the “Cool factor” but the rest of the lads at the RAAF would just accuse him of going through a second childhood. He picked up his cell phone and dialed.

“General Ratliff, Commander Klaus. What would be the procedure for bringing a personal vehicle on base. Josh has me convinced that I should buy an armored Hummer. You will? Thank you sir! See you Monday at 0800 sharp.”

Nick shook his head. “My Wing Commander said that if I wanted one, he had no objection as long as it wasn’t armed.” Nick knew that he meant a TOW or Ma Deuce armed Hummer. Josh gave him the number for the Hummer dealer in town, and he had 2 H1 Hummers just like Sheila’s for sale. Nick told Karen the dealer had 2 just like Sheila’s left. Karen’s smile told Nick her answer. “Sir, could you hold those two for me until Monday. Yes, I said I wanted both, and I’ll pay by check. Yeah, I do know him, we’re driving in his Hummer right now.” Nick handed the phone to Josh, who told the Dealer to take his referral fee out of the price he would normally have charged Nick for 2 Hummers then handed the phone back to Nick. “Right, I’ll see you Monday with a check, right around 1200 noon.”

“Thanks Josh, he knocked \$10 grand off the price of the Hummers instead of paying you your referral fee.”

“What would it take for you to get a weapons permit like mine?”

“Just a couple of hours of paperwork - why?”

“This Hummer’s equipped with gun ports, and there’s a loaded Mini UZI under each of the front seats. Remember those straps you had the mechanic make? He made 1 so I can carry a loaded UZI and 3 extra mags under each seat, and the only way they’d find them if by a deliberate search. Driving an armored car is nice, but being able to fight back is even better.”

“Yeah, I saw those Mini-UZIs, and they’d make a formidable vehicle defense gun. Even better

than a Witness protection shotgun.”

“That’s not all, I’ve also got a smoke screen, high-power strobes, and high -voltage door handles to prevent car jacking.”

“What no ejection seat?”

“Nope, Sheila wouldn’t appreciate it.”

Nick looked at Sheila sitting in the passenger seat, and guessed she’d be pretty mad if Josh pressed the ejection seat button while she was in it! When they got to the RAAF base, Josh showed his ID, and they drove to his hangar. The SuperGoose had already been fueled and washed, and there were 2 Airmen standing there to load the plane and help them get it ready for flight. Nick and Karen climbed the air stairs into the passenger cabin. Karen really liked the VIP seats. Once the plane was loaded, Josh and Sheila did a walk-around, and climbed into the cockpit. With an airman standing there with a fire extinguisher, he started #1 then #2, then once the turbines were in the green, bumped the throttles out of idle, then waited while the airman pulled the chocks, and taxied to the runway while contacting the tower. When he received clearance, he took off for Sheila’s parents Station.

4 hours later, they landed at the station, Jack was waiting for them, and as soon as they got out, he gave Sheila a hug, then walked over to Nick, shook his hand, and said “Long time no see!” Nick remembered the last time he saw Tim’s parents was when he delivered the news that he was lost at sea and presumed dead, then 2 days later, told them they’d found Tim’s body. When Karen got out, Nick introduced her as his fiancé Karen Sullivan. Jack shook her hand, and told them to get in the truck while 2 ranch hands loaded all the rifles into the bed of the truck along with their suitcases. Sheila must have called ahead, because Nellie had 2 bedrooms ready. She gave Nick a big hug, then broke down crying “Nick you’ve been gone far too long, please come over more often. You were Tim’s best friend, and part of the family.”

“Thanks Nellie, I really missed the place. Between Sheila staying with me, and having the two of them living with me, they’ve finally drawn me out of my self-imposed prison. I’d like you to meet my fiancé Karen Sullivan. If you remember correctly, we were dating when Tim died. In my grief I pushed away the one woman I loved, and turned into a womanizing drunk. Seeing how much Sheila and Josh love each other reminded me of what I was missing, so I called up Karen, and she’d just broken up with her boyfriend, and we got talking, and one thing led to another. I tell you God works in mysterious ways. If you hadn’t sent Sheila to live with me, I’d have never met her and Josh, and see what a married couple is really like. Thank God Karen was still in love with me, so everything worked out. Do you have a justice of the peace here, I’d like to marry Karen here, because this is where my family is.”

Nick turned to Karen. “I know it’s sudden, but I feel home here. If not now, in a week or so, but I wanted to get married right here at the Station.”

“Nick, if you remember, I’m an only child, and my parents died in a car wreck like yours several years ago, so this is as good as any place. I can see that Jack and Nellie are like family to you. If they can locate a JP this quick, let’s get married this weekend, if not whenever we can arrange it. I’m not going anywhere, and I don’t need a piece of paper to feel like I’m married to you. When you drove me out, I never really left - that’s probably why I broke up with my boyfriend, because I was still in love with you.”

Jack told them that the JP lived in the next station over, and if they wanted to, they could get married tomorrow. Josh asked them if they wanted to go shooting today. They both eagerly said yes. Jack came back and said that the JP could be there at noon tomorrow, so they could go shooting that afternoon, and have a small wedding with the immediate family tomorrow. The rifles were still in the truck, and they’d be good to go as soon as he put his and Nellie’s M -25's in the bed. Nick’s eyebrows lifted almost an inch - Jack didn’t have the kind of money to buy \$5,000 dollar rifles. Josh walked over to him and explained that his dad bought them for them when they were in Alaska the last time. Nick realized he could easily own a pair too with the kind of money he had, and decided to ask Josh after they were done shooting that afternoon. When Jack came out with 2 Pelican cases, and Nellie carrying a case of ammo, Nick knew they were ready and they all piled into the truck for the short drive to the range. Jack stapled targets onto the 6 target boards, then drove them back to the shooting line. In deference to Nick and Karen, they started on the 300-yard line. Jack and Nellie set up their positions, and as soon as they were ready, they started shooting. Josh set Nick and Karen up with the other 2 M -25's, and once they had their zeros set, they both proved to be pretty good shooters, shooting 4 inch groups at 300 yards prone with the bipod. Once their groups shrank, Josh suggested that they move back to the 600-yard line.

Since neither Nick or Karen seemed to need a shooting coach, Josh uncased his personal M - 25 and set up Sheila on the 600 yard line. He didn’t change her zero from his setting to see if she could shoot his zero. Josh was pleased but not surprised that Sheila’s group was right around 6 inches, and half an inch to the right from being well-centered. As long as she didn’t have to make head shots at 600 yards, she could shoot his zero with his M -25. He uncased his M -200 and left the scope set to his settings. Sheila got set up, and got behind the scope. When she was ready, he handed her a loaded magazine, and when she was done shooting, she still shot a 10-inch group, and 1 inch to the right. Josh picked her up and kissed her, and when she asked what that was for, Josh told her she was shooting his rifles, with his zeros, and all it did was move her group to the right, which meant she could shoot his zero, so when they went back to Alaska, they could form a second husband-wife sniper team. His older brother Jake was the prime sniper now that his dad was older, and his wife Diane was his back-up. Bear was going to pair Josh and Jake up until Josh joined the SEALs, so he was short a team. Everyone in Allakaket was part of the militia in case the village got attacked. She said “Whoa wait a minute there sailor - what do you mean attacked?”

Josh explained what had previously happened, and unless the Russians or Chinese invaded, they were safer in Alaska than they were in Australia. Sniper teams had to be able to shoot each

other's zeros, since they only brought 2 rifles with them, an M -200, and an M -25. The primary sniper was supposed to engage targets at 1,000 yards or beyond if necessary, and the backup was to spot and provide defensive firepower if necessary, or engage closer forces with aimed rapid fire shots.

"So you want me for your Sniper Partner? What about our kids?"

"Jake told me that he and Diane had this conversation, and she realized that the kids would be safe in town, and if they ran into such a superior force that they both were killed, the civilians in town even in the shelter didn't stand much of a chance either. It's our job to engage high-value and strategic targets at extreme range. We've got plenty of backup ranging from riflemen with Grenade launchers to Bradleys with the new Robogun system, to anti-air systems and Vulcan weapons systems, to the Snow Fox armed reconnaissance vehicles. If the town gets attacked, every able bodied person will either be defending it, or protecting the women and children in the bunker. At least in Alaska, we're properly armed and trained to repel any invader or attacker. Even my sister Sarah is a sniper. Ralph's wife Samantha was her back-up shooter."

"Wow, I married into a family of snipers. OK, this will take some getting used to."

Josh handed her back her M -25, then set up next to her to practice and hopefully encourage her to get her groups smaller. He hoped it wouldn't depress her to see him shooting 3 inch groups at 600 yards when she was shooting 6-inch groups. Over the day, her groups continued to shrink, and by the end of the day, she was averaging 5 inches at 600 yards. Josh thought not bad for a rookie. They packed it up before dinner and drove back to the ranch house. The discussion around the dinner table revolved around shooting and weddings. Josh decided to tell a story that combined both. He was only a little kid when his dad told it to him, but he remembered it well enough to joke about it when he was talking to Sheila before their wedding.

Karen said she was glad that they were getting married at the Station since she had a couple of ex-boyfriends that she could say were psychos. Josh said not to worry, both Sheila and him would be packing. Karen got an interesting reaction from Nick when she opened her purse and pulled out a stainless .38 special Chief's Special and said "Me Too."

"What the bloody hell are you doing with that?"

"Settle down Nick. Years ago, before I met you, an ex-boyfriend tried to kill me, and nearly succeeded. My dad was still alive, and bought me the gun and taught me how to shoot it. He said that it was illegal as heck in Sydney, but it was better to be tried by 12 than carried by 6, and I've carried it every day since then."

"The first thing I'm going to do when we get back on Monday is to process the paperwork to make us both legal to carry anywhere."

Josh said, "In that case, you both might want to up-gun a little." He reached into his waistband and carefully drew his P-14 Limited, making sure not to point the barrel at anyone, dropped the mag, cycled the slide, and caught the round in midair. He locked the slide open and handed the whole thing to Nick.

"You've been carrying these cannons around?"

"Sheila's got 1 too, they're not that heavy once you get used to it, and the Cor-bon 200 grain jacketed hollow point "flying ashcan" has the best 1-shot stopping specs of all non-magnum rounds in the latest Marshall/Sanow tests. The SEALs prefer the .45acp or the 10mm round for their sidearms or subguns. Some teams use the H&K MP-5SD, but that's because they've got a ton of them, and they're suppressed. The few teams that can get hold of the MP-5/10SD prefer the 10mm round over the 9mm since it's a better stopper."

"I'll have to check and see if I can get any of these P-14's any more, ParaOrd stopped making them years ago, and getting any modern handgun in a military caliber is pretty tough now in Australia since they enacted their tough gun control laws years ago."

"We're sitting on several cases of them in Allakaket. If necessary, I'll have Bear ship a couple to you."

"Thanks Josh, but the paperwork to import pistols is almost as much as to get a concealed weapons permit."

"Don't worry, if you want them, I'll get them."

They talked until it was time to go to bed. Nick and Karen went to bed together, and Sheila was wondering why Nellie didn't give them a hard time, then he realized that Nellie wasn't Nick's Mother, and they were both adults. Nick was in his early 40's, and Karen was in her mid-30's, so they'd been around the block a few times, and from what he'd heard, they were already lovers from the last time they were living together before Tim died almost 10 years ago.

Josh and Sheila were too tired to fool around, so he held her until they fell asleep in each other's arms. Josh woke up to a numb arm, and as soon as Sheila moved, he stifled a scream as the blood flowed back into his arm. He made enough noise to wake the house, and he apologized at breakfast saying his arm went numb, and the return of circulation was painful. Nick and Jack had both been there before and nodded understandingly. The 3 women made breakfast, then they got ready for the wedding lunch and got dressed in the best clothes they had brought. At Noon, the Justice of the Peace showed up, and they were married on their porch. It was a simple ceremony, then they signed the license and Nick paid the JP the fee for the license and ceremony. He told Nick he'd file the license on Monday when he went back to his office, and gave Nick and Karen each a copy. Nick told Karen he had a huge safe deposit box at the bank, so they could put it in there. They spent the rest of the afternoon sitting on the porch eating

finger food and drinking iced tea, since they had to fly back before dark, and Josh never drank at least 12 hours before flying. Right before dark, they boarded the SuperGoose and flew back to Sydney. Nick was glad that their bedrooms were on opposite wings of the huge mansion, because he knew Karen was a noisy lover, and he'd heard the sounds of passion coming from Josh and Sheila's bedroom more than once. Monday morning, Nick looked like something the cat dragged in, and that was after a shower. Sheila made breakfast for the 4 of them, since she was in the best condition to do so. Once breakfast was over, Nick drove Karen to work to pick up her final check, then dropped her off at the house, and barely made it to work by 0800. He had a pile of paperwork to fill out. Once the paperwork was done, he requested the rest of the afternoon off, picked up Karen and drove to the Hummer dealer, picked up the Hummers, and drove them to Q's shop. Josh met them at Q's shop and drove them home. Nick ordered 2 armor setups just like Josh's, and 2 armored trailers. Q muttered something about "why didn't you order them last month, I could have gotten a better price on the Kevlar panels" and went to work.

Nick still had his Government issue Hummer, so he drove it until Q called and said their Hummers and trailers were done. Josh dropped them off, and shook his head when Q went through the same routine with Nick as he did with Josh. This guy must have been cast as a stand-in for Q, he was a dead-ringer, and acted just like him. He was about to ask Q if he ever worked for MI-5, but realized if he did, he wouldn't be able to tell them anyway. When Nick met up with Josh at his house, Nick said "Now I know why you call him Q - he acts just like the old geezer. I can't believe all the stuff he threw in at no charge."

"Trust me, the quote they gave you included everything, that's just Q being Q."

2 weeks later, a big box showed up for Josh when the UPS driver showed up. Josh signed for the package, then got Sheila to help him haul it inside the house. When he opened it up, inside was a note from Bear, 2 cased M -25's with the Springfield Scope and 20 20-round Magazines, 4 Mini-UZIs with 20 30-round magazines, 4 ParaOrd P-14's and 20 14-round magazines for the P-14's. What weighed so much was the 4 cases each of Cor-bon 200gr. JHP ammo and Black Hills .308 Match ammo. The note read "I hope you don't have any more friends in Australia, it's getting tough to ship stuff there. Bear"

Josh called Bear on his shoe phone, and thanked him for the package. Bear said that was all the guns he could ship, but he could send them more ammo if necessary. He'd just have to slip it into a shipment of SuperGoose parts. Josh was glad that his shoe phone came with an unbreakable encryption system, and that he'd given a copy to Bear and his Dad, or else he'd probably be getting a knock on the door in a couple of days. He guaranteed the security of the system by constantly calling on it with routine traffic, so he was pretty sure the NSA had put his phone on their Ignore list.

When Nick and Karen came home later that day, Josh made them a present of 2 P-14's with 5 mags each, and 2 Mini-Uzis with 5 mags each, and 1,000 rounds of Cor-bon ammo. Nick nearly

fainted when Josh handed him 2 Pelican cases and said that they each contained an M -25 just like the ones they shot last week. Finally, he added a case of .308 Match ammo to the pile.

“How the bloody hell did you get these past customs?”

“Ask me no questions, I’ll tell you no lies!”

“Good thing our Concealed Weapons permits came through today. You realize we’re going to have to fly out to the station this weekend to learn how to shoot these bloody things?”

“I was planning on it!”

Josh decided to offer the 2 spare UZIs and P-14s to Jack and Nellie when they flew up there on Friday afternoon. Jack was woefully under-gunned with the Webley and the broomhandle Mauser. He’d probably have puppies when he realized the UZI was full-auto, but Josh hoped he’d get over it quick.

Chapter 84 - The Station

Thursday afternoon, Sheila got a call saying her doctorate mentor was cancelling their Friday meeting. He had to go to a conference he couldn't get out of. Instead of getting mad, she checked with Nick and Karen, and they decided to fly to her parent's station Friday morning instead of Saturday, giving them another day to shoot. When Josh came home that afternoon, he was glad Sheila had taken care of things for him. The IP he was supposed to train on Friday was admitted to the base hospital that afternoon with acute food poisoning, and was off flight status for 2 weeks. Nick called the Maintenance supervisor, and requested the SuperGoose be cleaned and fueled, and ready for departure at 0800 Friday morning. Nick wasn't one to waste daylight either.

The next morning they drove Josh's Hummer onto the RAAF base, parked next to the hangar, and 2 airmen transferred their baggage onto the SuperGoose while Josh and Sheila did a walk-around. When they finished loading, Josh reached inside to raise and lock the rear loading ramp. Once their walk-around was complete, they all climbed aboard. Nick and Karen took adjoining seats, and Josh and Sheila got into the Pilot and Co-pilot's chairs respectively. Once the turbines were started, the airman pulled the chocks, Josh contacted the tower, then taxied to the runway. Once they were airborne, it only took 4 hours to reach the station. Jack was waiting for them again, and was glad that he brought 2 ranch hands with him when he saw how many cases Josh had with him. When they reached the ranch, Nellie was standing on the porch to greet them. Once everyone was inside, Josh asked Nick to help him remove some cases from the truck. They used a dolly to remove the case with the 2 P-14's with 10 magazines, 2 Mini-UZIs with 10 magazines, and the case of Cor-bon ammo. When they wheeled it into the center of the living room, Jack stood there looking puzzled until Josh told him that they had a little present for the both of them, and opened the cases. First he handed Jack the 2 holstered P-14's, then the 10 magazines. He noticed they were IWB holsters, and asked Josh what was going on.

"Bear shipped me some stuff for Nick and Karen, and gave me some extra hardware while he was at it. He said that this would have to be it on the hardware since it was getting harder to ship stuff, so he doubled what I ordered. Since the 4 of us are all carrying, and Sheila said you 2 rarely leave the station anymore, we felt that you 2 could use and appreciate the hardware. Even if you carry openly, if things keep going the way they do, the government might try to make you stop carrying openly, leaving you the choice of carrying concealed or being disarmed. If you get used to carrying concealed now, all you'll have to do when the gov't makes it illegal to carry openly is to stop carrying that old Webley on your belt, and keep carrying the concealed P-14. That IWB holster completely conceals the pistol if you wear your shirts out, and there are 5 magazines for each pistol, and 5 single magazine carriers for each as well. You might want to start by only carrying 2 spares, but having the rest handy could mean the difference between running out of ammo and dying or not. Way out here, you could get attacked by bands of brigands. I'm assuming you've seen Mad Max. If things go nuts in Sydney, Brisbane, or the Cairns, the survivors would be headed this way because they would know that the stations all

have a reliable source of water. The next present would come in real handy if that were to happen.” Josh reached into the case and extracted the 2 Mini-UZIs. Jack’s eyes lit up like Christmas had come early.

“I always wanted 1 of those!”

Josh handed it to him, and when Jack realized it was a Full-auto Uzi, he exclaimed “Bloody Hell, this is a Full-Auto Weapon, what are you trying to do, get us thrown in Prison?”

“Jack, I highly doubt most of the weapons you own are strictly legal, and will probably be worth major prison time later. Basically they can only hang you once.”

“You’ve got a point there. Even my semi-auto Mini-14 could get me 10-20. At my age, that’s basically life in prison.”

“Nick brought their UZIs as well, would it be OK if we practiced with them here?”

“Sure, all the ranch hands wouldn’t care, and our nearest neighbors are almost 100 miles away.” Josh put everything back in the case, and they hauled them back out to the truck. They spent the rest of the day learning how to shoot the Para Ordinance P-14 Limited, and the .45 acp Mini-Uzis. Jack didn’t even comment about the suppressors, but he really appreciated the fact that they were really quiet. By the end of the day, they’d learned trigger control. The 4 of them were already pretty good pistol shots, so the P-14 only took a little while to get used to. Nick was amazed at how accurate his P-14 was, since he had shot several Colt .45's that friends had owned before the government “got stupid” as he put it.

The next day, they were shooting their M -25 rifles, and later that afternoon, they put them up, and moved back to the 1000-yard line to shoot Josh and Sheila’s M -200s. They set up 2 positions on the line, then Josh and Sheila went first. It had been a while since Josh had shot the M -200 at 1,000 yards, and it showed. His first group measured about 6 inches through the spotting scope. Sheila’s first group measured 10 inches, and the first round was in the bullseye. Jack was watching his daughter shoot through the spotting scope, and couldn’t believe his “little Sheila” just put 10 rounds into a target 1,000 yards downrange, and the biggest spread he could see was about 10 inches! He switched his view to Josh’s target, and was totally stunned. Josh’s group was maybe 6 inches across, and 2 rounds were in the bullseye!

When they were finished and swapped fresh targets, Jack and Nellie were next. Josh was coaching Jack, and Sheila was coaching her Mom. They both were pretty good shots, but hadn’t tried shooting at anything much past 300 yards. Looking through the scope, Jack was amazed how big the target was, the 10-inch x-ring looked huge through the scope. Josh explained that Swarovski put a brand-new 10-25x 80mm scope on the M -200. Once the rifle was adjusted, Jack looked through it again, and the crosshairs were sitting right on the x-ring. Josh told him to go ahead and take a firing grip, and take 10 dry fires to get used to the trigger, and to pay

attention to where the crosshair was when the trigger broke. Jack had been trained by the Royal Marines how to shoot rifle, but realized he was out of his league, and paid attention to Josh's every word.

Once he was through with the dry firing, Josh handed him a loaded magazine, and had him cycle the action. Josh got onto the spotting scope and told Jack to go ahead whenever he was ready. Jack took Josh's word that the kick was about equal to a shotgun or 30-caliber magnum rifle. He was amazed when he touched the trigger the first time that the stock barely kicked him. He was expecting something in the order of his .460 Weatherby out of the huge round he was firing. Josh explained that the suppressor not only suppressed muzzle blast, but acted as one heck of a muzzle brake, and was probably on the order of 3-5 times more efficient than the brake on the model 82. Jack had seen pictures of the Barrett's Model 82, and thought that the muzzle break on that gun belonged on a tank.

In the next lane over, Sheila was working with her Mom, who was a little uneasy about shooting such a huge round. Sheila said "Relax Mom, it's like shooting your .308 Remington." Nellie got behind the scope and was amazed at how big and clear the image was through the scope. She could see the target over 1,000 yards away better through this scope than she could see a target 300 yards away through her Redfield. Once she got settled down, she started dry firing the rifle, and calmed down further. Sheila handed her a loaded magazine, and she cycled the action. She knew how to shoot through her wobble, and she was amazed when the first round went through the 10-inch X-ring. She kept shooting, and when she had 10 rounds fired, Sheila told her that she did pretty good with a 15-inch group. Sheila let her shoot the rifle for a couple more hours, and her groups eventually got down to 13 inches. Jack's smallest group turned out to be 11 inches. They packed everything back up and headed back to the ranch house when it got dark, and decided to shoot their M -25's the next day.

The next morning Jack, Nick and Josh set up 6 shooting positions on the 600 yard line, then uncased their M - 25's. Nick was surprised to see that Bear had included 10 20-round magazines with each of their rifles. Everyone loaded their magazines, then carried their rifles to the shooting line, and got ready to shoot. Over the next 8 hours, they shot the entire case of 1,000 rounds between the 4 of them. Josh knew that they needed to get their hands on some more Lake City Match ammo, and asked Nick if his Wing Commander would let them ship a 20,000 round container full of .308 Match, and another 10,000 rounds of the BMG-50 Match ammo through the RAAF base, since he needed to stay in practice for the M -200 project that was coming up. Nick pulled out his cell phone, and the General told him what they wanted to do, and said it was OK with him, since Josh had to stay in shape to teach the shooting instructors. It wouldn't do to have Josh embarrassed in front of the instructors by them shooting much smaller groups than he did, since he'd lose all credibility with the instructors if that happened. Nick told Josh he'd fill out the import paper Monday morning. When they were done shooting, Jack was looking at Josh's targets, and none of his groups were much bigger than 3 inches at 600 yards, with usually 1 or more rounds in the bullseye. Now he knew how Josh could shoot all those Kangaroos in the head, a 6-inch target at 300-400 yards was a walk in the park for Josh. Josh

was a better shot than just about any professional hunters he had met. Once they had everything packed back up, they drove back to the ranch house for an early dinner, Josh had to fly them home that evening since Nick had to be at work at 0800 sharp, and Sheila had to reschedule her mentor meeting. After they landed at the RAAF base, Josh drove them back to the house, and they all went to sleep.

After breakfast, Nick drove to the RAAF base with Josh, who was training IP pilots all that week in the SuperGoose. Nick got the ammunition importation paperwork started first thing. Josh picked him up when he was through, and they ate dinner together at Nick's place. Karen told them that the Contractor called and had a couple of questions about their houses. Nick deferred to Josh saying "It's your design."

"What if it's an interior decorating question, or an appliance selection question?"

"In that case either Sheila or Karen can handle it. Just call the guy and find out what he wants."

Josh called the contractor "Mr. Williams, glad you called. Outback Power Systems called to say the shipment will be delivered tomorrow."

"Ok, so install it per the instructions."

"I don't have a copy of the instructions."

"I'm sure the installation manual is with the shipment, I thought you'd done this kind of building before, and you knew your way around an AE system."

"I'm not an expert."

"If you need to hire one, you pay for them. I gave you this contract because you assured me you were competent to do it, now I'm starting to have my doubts."

"Don't worry Mr. Williams, I'll handle it."

"Just make sure it's done on time and done right. There's a 5 thousand dollar per day penalty for not completing on time, plus a \$1 million surety bond for quality of workmanship. Is there any thing else?"

"No sir, I'll take care of it!"

"See that you do!"

Once he hung up, Josh swore to himself "How come I always get stuck with the Amateurs - it would be nice to be working with pros again for a change."

Nick heard the exchange, and Josh's oath. "Josh that's not really fair. You're comparing a competent contractor to the SEALs you're used to working with. Of course he's not going to be as professional or positive. SEALs are in the top 1% of the Military, and the Military is usually the top 10% as far as professionalism and discipline."

"Nick, this guy is supposed to be a General Contractor. He shouldn't be calling me for piddly stuff like this. If he can't do it, he should have hired a sub that could. I'm not paying him half a mill per building for this BS!"

"Ok Josh you're right, do you want to fire him and hire a new General, or give him a chance to get his act together."

"It was a lot of work finding this guy, I don't want to go through this again."

"Maybe you should call your dad - he'd probably know what to do."

"Good idea Nick, I'm not used to being a civilian or rich."

"Hello dad, you got a minute?"

"Of course Josh. What can I do for you."

"I'm having problems with my General Contractor."

"Well call your lawyer."

"I don't have one."

"That's your first problem. Son, you're worth over \$50 million now, your time is too valuable to be dealing with contractors. Get a good legal firm, and put them on retainer, and let them handle it."

"Ok, can you help me locate a really good one in Sydney, Maybe BA or someone knows who is really good, and won't charge an arm and a leg."

"Josh the good ones always charge an arm and a leg, but they're worth it!"

A couple of hours later, Josh's e-mail beeped. He opened it, and it was an e-mail from BA saying that his Corporate Counsel recommended Goldrick, Farrell & Mullan in Sydney, and listed their contact numbers and e-mail address.

Josh forwarded the e-mail to the address BA gave him, and the next day, one of their partners, Vincent Goldrick called.

“Mr. Williams, you come highly recommended, what can we do for you?”

“My dad suggested I get a law firm on retainer to handle all my business dealings.”

“Great we can set you up with an Associate, a Legal Clerk, and a Private Secretary for a \$250,000 retainer and a \$100,000 annual fee.”

“OK, my friend Commander Nicolas Klaus needs the same services.”

“In that case, if you’re willing to share their services, I can offer you a \$300 thousand retainer, and \$100 thousand annual fee. If you could come to the office to sign some paperwork and deposit the retainer, we’ll get started.”

“Great, thanks Mr. Goldrick.”

“Nick, we need to see Vincent Goldrick at Goldrick, Farrell & Mullan.”

“I can take a long lunch tomorrow if you like.”

“Ok, works for me.”

The next day, they drove to the law offices in downtown Sydney, or more exactly the skyscraper they were in. The valet parked their Hummer, and they rode the elevator to the 35th floor. The door opened into the G, F & M lobby. Josh walked up to the receptionist.

“Hi, Josh Williams here to see Mr. Goldrick.”

The receptionist picked up the phone, and 30 seconds later, they were escorted to Vincent Goldrick’s office. It was huge and had a commanding view of the Sydney harbor skyline. Mr. Goldrick spent 5 minutes with them, shook their hands, and handed them off to an Associate, Mr. Heinz, who did all the actual work. He had them signing their lives away, including a limited power of attorney for the firm, the retainer, and disclosure forms. Once they were finished signing, they were introduced to the rest of Mr. Heinz’ staff, Jeb Stuart, his Law Clerk, and Mrs. Francis, one of his legal secretaries, who would also be their Personal Assistant and point of contact with the firm. She handed them her card, and said if they needed anything to call her. Josh asked her “Am I a Client yet?”

“If you signed the forms and paid the retainer fee - why?”

“Nick and I are building houses next to each other, and the Contractor’s charging us half a million each, but he doesn’t seem to be on the top of everything, and called me the other day for something he should have taken care of.”

“Mr. Williams, I can handle that with 1 phone call. If you could leave me the contractor’s name and number, I’m sure it will be taken care of to your satisfaction.”

“Thank you Mrs. Francis.”

They both shook her hand, and Josh programmed her number into his shoe phone, then Nick did the same. By the time Josh got home that afternoon, Josh had a message from Mrs. Francis who said she’d taken care of the matter, and if Mr. Conroy had any more questions, he was instructed to contact the Law Firm. Nick smiled and told Josh that having a high-powered law firm do your work for you got people’s attention, and he shouldn’t have any further problems with that contractor. After dinner, they sat down, and read the paperwork the firm gave them. They discussed using the firm’s investment services, and other services they offered. Right now, neither one of them had much in the way of investments. Josh’s trust fund was administered by his Dad’s legal firm, and Nick hadn’t receive the proceeds of his house yet.

The next morning, Sheila got up early, then 10 minutes later ran into the bedroom, and woke Josh up with a very passionate kiss. “Wake up Daddy!”

“Huh, what time is it?”

“In 9 months, it will be time to say hello to you’re new Child. I used an EPT, and I’m definitely pregnant!”

Josh grabbed his wife, swung her around like a rag doll, and hugged her hard until she pounded on his shoulder. When he loosened his grip, she said “Unhand me you Aquatic Freak - you almost suffocated me!” Josh relaxed his grip, but kept holding Sheila. Finally they decided to get dressed and tell Nick and Karen. When they got out to the living room, Nick and Karen were sitting on the couch practically glowing. Sheila blurted out “I’m Pregnant!” Karen jumped up, ran over and gave her a big hug, and said “Me too!”

“I thought you were on the pill?”

“I stopped taking them over a year ago, and insisted my ex-boyfriend use a condom. That was one of the reasons he left, said it didn’t feel right to him. I read a pamphlet about STDs, and that was all it took to convince me. Once I got back with Nick and realized we wanted to start a family, I suggested he not use a condom, and now I’m pregnant too!”

Josh spoke up “Congratulations you two, I guess this calls for a celebration. Do you want to go out to eat, or is it OK if Sheila and I cook for the 2 of you?”

“What were you thinking of?”

“How about Steaks and shrimp on the barbeque?”

Sounds like a plan, I'll pick up a small bottle of Champagne. Say 5:00 tonight?"

Josh remembered he hadn't told his parents, so he picked his shoe phone off the nightstand and dialed his parent's number then called Sheila over. "Mom, Dad, Sheila and I have some great news. Go ahead honey."

"Ron, Nancy, I just found out this morning you're going to be grandparents. I'm pregnant!"

Nancy hugged Ron, then the two women talked for a while. Finally, Sheila handed the phone to Josh. "He Did? Is everything OK? Let me know if I can do anything to help. I'm already praying for them. Thanks, Bye Dad."

"Is everyone OK?"

"Isabel blew up when she found out that Dad had effectively cut her off from the family fortune, and ordered David to have a "word" with his dad. Bear and BA were there when he confronted him, and made him realize that Isabel was manipulating him, and as BA said "David, She's got you so dominated you can't fart without her permission." David laughed then cried as he realized they were right. He told Dad that he didn't love Isabel, and just wanted someone to take care of him. What he got instead was a nightmare of verbal and mental abuse. He confided in his dad that they never consummated their marriage, and that they slept in separate beds. It was so bad that she basically ordered him around the house, and treated him like her slave. Dad was furious, and Bear wanted to go over there, shoot her, and stash the body somewhere. BA had a better idea, and called the Corporate lawyer, who had already got a judges signature on a separation and temporary restraining order, pending either a criminal investigation or annulment, depending on whether or not Isabel contested the annulment. BA had wisely insisted on a Pre-nuptial agreement, so the most she could get was the funds in their joint savings account which amounted to half a million dollars, and her personal belongings. Since Allakaket had grown so much they now had a Sheriff and 1 deputy, so BA called the Sheriff, who went with his Deputy to enforce the order, remove her from the house, and give her the choice of a flight to Anchorage or Fairbanks, or a weekend in Jail until she could arrange bail. She decided to take the ticket. They watched while she packed her few possessions, then drove her straight to the airport and put her aboard the flight to Fairbanks. Jake made sure she got off the plane in Fairbanks, then handed her a letter from the Corporate attorney indicating that if she signed the attached annulment agreement, she'd receive a settlement check worth \$100,000.00. If she didn't sign, or attempted to contact David, she'd get nothing, and he could guarantee that she would be prosecuted for several felonies including spouse abuse and theft by fraud. She wisely decided to cut her losses, signed the agreement, and took the check. The last Jake saw of her, she was in line to buy a ticket to the far northern region of Alaska, where Jake vaguely remembered Isabel was from. He thought "Good riddance" and turned around to go home."

Chapter 85 - David's new love

Several weeks later, David went with his parents to services on Sunday and noticed a young woman sitting by herself. She looked like she had been crying. After the service, he saw her go to the Nursery and pick up an infant. Then he heard "Poor Heather, did you hear her husband just died in a Fishing accident. He never even saw his newborn son." David's sensitive heart was moved with compassion for her, and walked up to her. "Hi Heather, I'm David. I know you really don't feel like talking to anyone right now, but I just wanted you to know that if you want someone to talk to, call me."

"David, that's awfully sweet of you, but I just lost my Husband."

"I know, I just lost my wife. She didn't die or anything, she just left and never came back."

"How sad. I guess it wouldn't hurt to talk." He walked her to his truck, since she walked to church, and he said she didn't have to walk home. They drove to her small house, and she set Levon's carrier down. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Please, black with Sugar."

10 minutes later she came back with 2 huge mugs of coffee. He was looking at the pictures, and spotted her husband's. He sighed, since the guy looked like a nice guy, and now he was dead. When she sat down, he sat on the chair opposite her.

"I saw that picture of your husband, he seems like a nice guy."

"He was. He decided to take the job working on a crab fishing boat when his friend couldn't. He told him how much money he could make in a couple of weeks. What he forgot to tell him was how dangerous crabbing is. They normally loose 1 ship and crew every couple of seasons. They work 24-hours a day with minimal sleep, sometimes the arctic waves are taller than the 30-foot mast, and every now and then when it gets really bad, they're double that tall. They try to set pots to trap crabs, then haul them back aboard hours later. If they get lucky, you can earn several hundred thousand dollars per season. If you're unlucky, you're broke or dead. Gene was unlucky. One of the other captains told me that they got caught out in a storm they had no business being out in. All the other boats were headed to safety, but his captain decided to risk it to bring in another line of pots. One minute they were on the radio, the next silence. The other boats searched for them, but usually if a ship goes down out there, there aren't any survivors. They either drown or freeze to death. He said he preferred freezing to death. It took longer, but wasn't supposed to be painful in the frigid waters. You kind of went to sleep and never woke up. Anyway, that's what I hope happened to Gene. So tell me your story."

"I married an older woman last year named Isabel. She was an Inuit woman from a Northern

Alaskan tribe. I'd been living at home, and I guess I wanted someone to take care of me, and Mom was giving me some pretty serious hints that they wanted their privacy, so I asked her to marry me. It was the biggest mistake of my life. She had the headache from Hell on our wedding night, and we never had sex after that. Slowly but surely, I let her manipulate me to the point that BA said that I couldn't fart without her permission. I was miserable and suicidal. Finally my Dad took the extraordinary measure of putting me on an allowance, with no disbursements from my trust fund beyond that without his written permission. I didn't care, I had millions in the bank, but Isabel went ballistic, and ordered me to talk to my Dad and get the payments restored. When I went there, my Dad's friends Bear and BA were waiting for me, and confronted me with the truth that Isabel was using me to get to my family's money. She'd been sending checks out of our account every month for anywhere from 25 thousand dollars to 100 thousand, and never bought anything. After a year, she'd transferred almost a million dollars to another bank in Nome Alaska. My Dad showed me the transfers, and that's when I realized I had been had. By the time I made it back home, she was gone without a note. All her stuff was packed, and it looked like she left in a hurry. I think my Dad had something to do with it because he handed me a signed Annulment agreement and told me I didn't need to worry about her anymore. I'm not mad at him, in fact I'm grateful. I've got this big beautiful empty house, so Dad suggested I move back in with them until I get my act together, whatever that means."

"You seem to have your act pretty together. I'm guessing they don't want you to get hurt again."

"The last thing I want to do is to rush right into another marriage."

"David, I wanted to thank you for the drive home and the conversation. You're a really good listener, and it helps to talk about it. Some nights I just lay in bed and pray that this is all a nightmare, and then I roll over to an empty bed, and realize it's all real. I need a husband, and Levon needs a father, but I'm not in a hurry either. Problem is all the guys who hang at the Moose Café where I work are a bunch of drunken bums, and they'd make lousy fathers."

"Heather, do you have any other skills?"

"Yeah now that you mention it, Gene and I met in Art School, I was studying Graphic Art, and had almost finished my Associates degree when Gene proposed, and we moved to Alaska."

"Do you know your way around a computer?"

"I've used both Mac and Windows systems, and all the major graphics software."

"How'd you like a job. I've got more work than I can handle."

"I've never seen you in town, where do you work?"

“I’ve got a huge studio in my house. If you want, you can move into one of the spare rooms, and I’ll set the other up for your office so you have some privacy. I can afford to pay you way more than the Moose Café does, and there are absolutely no strings attached. I happen to still be a virgin, and plan on staying that way until I’m married.”

“David, this is all so sudden, but it is an answer to my prayers, the rent’s due next week, and I never got Gene’s last check since his boss went down with the ship.”

“Heather, let’s pray about this, and talk to Pastor Bill and my Parents. If they say OK, then it should be a good idea.”

“Thanks David, you’re so sweet for offering. My best offer up until now was to shack up with one of the boozers at the bar. That would have been a horrible life, but at least we would have a roof over our heads, and food on the table.”

“Heather - how much is the rent here?”

“\$200 per month, why?”

“Here’s a check for \$500. That will give you some time so you don’t have to rush into anything.”

“I can’t take this. It’s too much!”

“Nonsense, You’re a Sister in Christ, and you’re in need. I’ve got money to burn, and I’d rather be helping someone who needs it, then lining the pockets of someone who is trying to steal it from me.”

“Ok David, if you put it that way. Thanks.”

Heather stood up, put her arms around David, and kissed him on the cheek. The tender innocent hug and kiss meant more to him than the most passionate kiss he’d ever gotten in his life.

“Heather, I’ve got to go now. Here’s my number. Feel free to call me.” David handed her his business card, with all his numbers and e-mail addresses on it. She gave him another hug, then he set the mug down, walked over to Levon, and looked into his eyes. When they connected, David felt something he’d never felt before in his life, and he couldn’t put his finger on it. His best guess is he felt “connected” somehow to Levon. When he turned to go, he could see the tears in Heather’s eyes.

“Don’t cry, I’m not going anywhere.”

Heather took 3 quick strides, and threw herself into David’s arms, sobbing hysterically. David

held her until she stopped sobbing, and helped her wipe her tears.

“I can stay for a while if you need me to, but it wouldn’t be a good idea if I were still here after dark.”

“Why, do you change into a werewolf?”

“No a pumpkin!”

“David, just hold me for a minute more please. I feel like I’m drowning in tears.”

“You’ll be ok Heather. As long as you’ve got Levon, you’ll always have a part of Gene with you.”

Heather looked into David’s eyes, and something passed between them. David didn’t know what it was, but from that moment on, their lives would be different.

Later that afternoon, when he arrived back home, David sat down in the living room with Ron and Nancy “Mom, Dad, I need your advice. Remember that woman at church that lost her husband, and she was left with an infant to raise.”

“Vaguely, what’s up.”

“I had an idea, I need your advice. We spent the afternoon talking, and Heather works at the Moose café to pay her bills, but the rent’s due, and she didn’t have enough money to pay for it. She never asked for money, and didn’t want to take the \$500 check I gave her to tide her over. She was about to get evicted, and her only solution would have been to shack up with 1 of the town drunks at the café if I hadn’t helped. She’s got a degree in Graphic Arts and knows her way around a computer. I offered her a job and a place to stay with no strings attached. I told her I was still a virgin, and planned on staying that way until I was married. I’d like to help her, but I need your advice. Her husband just died, and I don’t want her reputation damaged by living with me, even though it would be totally platonic.”

Ron looked at his son with newfound pride. “David, I’m proud of you. You’ve got a really compassionate heart, but be careful, it can get you in trouble to trust the wrong people. Would you mind if I discretely checked out her story and talked to Bill. If her story is true, and she’s not trying to fleece you for your money, it sounds like a good idea. If you have an assistant, you can expand your business, take on bigger contracts, and it will give you someone your own age to talk to. Heather would benefit by having a stable job in a much better environment than a bar, and Levon will have a stable home environment. Just make sure you two don’t get romantically involved too soon, because it would be wrong for both of you, since you’re still in mourning over your last spouses, even though Isabel didn’t die. I knew you had feelings for her, otherwise you wouldn’t have married her. If you can wait a day or so, wait a minute, I can call the Sheriff

right now, and he can check her story. How did you say her husband died ?”

“In a fishing accident, they were crabbing when a storm came up, and they lost a whole vessel and crew. His name was Gene.”

“That should be easy enough to verify. I’ll be back in a minute.”

10 minutes later, Ron returned. “Her story checks. They did have a crabber go down with all hands 2 weeks ago, and one of the crew members was newly married. The Sheriff checked with the Fisheries department for a list of the missing crewmen, and the young newlywed was named Gene.”

“Ok Dad, so I can go ahead with my plan?”

“Let’s pray about it first.” The three of them gathered in the center of the living room with their arms around each other, silently praying for God to tell them what to do. Half an hour later, they were sure it was the right thing to do. Right then the phone rang. Nancy answered it, then called David to the phone, saying it was Heather.

“David, the weirdest thing just happened. I was sitting there praying when I felt compelled to call you. I don’t know how I know it, but this arrangement you were talking about would be perfect. I’d have a nice stable job, I wouldn’t be stuck in a bar 8 hours per day, and I’d have Levon right there next to me.”

“Heather, we just got done praying about it, and I know you’re right. It will take a couple of days to set up a studio in the other bedroom, and convert another bedroom so you and Levon would have your own room to stay in. I can pay you a salary of \$800 per week rent free, all you pay is half the utilities, your own phone bills, and either your personal food and supplies, or half of the food.”

“Levon’s going to need diapers and stuff I don’t think you should have to pay for. Why are you paying me so much?”

“I figured you’re worth \$20 dollars an hour for 40 hours per week, that equals \$800 per week. I’ve got a huge contract coming up with a New York Advertising agency for a major corporation with an annual renewal clause. If the two of us can handle the work, this contract has the potential to last several years.”

“Ok, let me know as soon as you want me to move in. I called the bar and gave my notice. Can you pick me up and take us to the General Store, I need to stock up on some stuff.”

“How about first thing tomorrow morning, the store will be closed in an hour, and I don’t know

if we can get there that soon.”

“Ok, if I can ask 1 more favor, if you can drop me off at the Credit Union so I can deposit your check first.”

“Sure, it’s right on the way. Say 8 o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“Thanks David, see you then.”

No sooner had they hung up, then David got on the computer to order another set of computer equipment to set up another office in his house. They had it in stock, so he requested 2nd day delivery to Anchorage AK, and delivery by private delivery company from there. Next he checked on furniture, then called her back to find out her trailer was furnished, and almost all of their furniture stayed. He asked her what she would need for her and Levon’s bedroom. When he hung up, he ordered it delivered ASAP. Next he told his Mom and Dad he needed to go back to his house, clean it up and get it ready for Heather and the baby. Ron suggested he sleep there that night, and get started in the morning.

Right after breakfast the next morning, Dave drove his pickup to Heather’s small trailer. He was amazed that a couple with a new baby could live there. His 4-bedroom house was over 3,000 square feet, not including the full basement. Their whole trailer was maybe 500-800 square feet. Heather brought Levon out in his baby carrier, all bundled up in even though it was over 40 degrees out. David walked around and opened both passenger side doors. Heather strapped Levon into the safer back seat, then climbed up front with David. “I don’t know how to thank you David - you’ve been so nice to me, and you don’t want anything in return.”

“All I wanted was a friend. You need a place to stay and a job, and I need someone to talk to, and you’re a trained Graphic Artist. This should work out pretty good. Once we’re done shopping, you should start transferring anything you won’t need in the next couple of days to my house. I’m having the furniture delivered tomorrow, and the computer and office stuff should be here the day after.”

“I talked to my Landlord, and explained the situation. He said he’d only charge me \$50 for the week, so I can spend the rest buying baby food and supplies. Let’s get your house cleaned up so I can move in as soon as possible.”

They stopped at the credit union where she cashed David’s check, then they stopped at her landlord’s place, and gave him a \$50 for the week. They drove over to the General Store, and Heather took a shopping list out of her purse and a calculator, and went down the aisles putting stuff in her cart. David did the same, but he was buying foodstuffs for the two of them. She checked out her baby food and supplies, then he handed the cashier his debit card, and bought over \$500 worth of food and supplies. Good thing he brought the truck, because the bed was full when they finished. They left Levon in the truck, and unloaded the bed, then they moved him

inside and set him on the middle of the kitchen table. Heather started in the kitchen, and David started in the bathroom, cleaning the house from top to bottom. Heather was careful what she used around Levon, but David used some heavy-duty disinfectants in the bathrooms, since they hadn't been cleaned in weeks. When they were finished, they drove back to Heather's trailer, and he helped her pack and move stuff over. She found a twin bed in another bedroom that David had forgotten about and asked if she could stay the night, since she needed some company and couldn't stand living in that trailer by herself one more night. David called his parents to let them know he was staying at his house with Heather that night. Ron reminded him of his promise, and David said that he had nothing to worry about. After he hung up, David made a simple dinner of steak and frozen vegetables. When he went to call Heather to dinner, he walked in on her nursing Levon. He was transfixed by the simple, beautiful and perfectly natural scene before him of Mother and son. Heather must have been tired, because she sat there with her eyes closed nursing her son. After a minute, David quietly walked out to wait for her to finish. 10 minutes later, he heard her finish nursing her son, so David told her that dinner was ready. She put Levon back in his carrier and went in to David.

"I'm sorry, I forgot I wasn't at my house. I hope I didn't bother you."

"Heather, this is your home too. I've got no problem with a mother nursing her son. It's what breasts were made for. My mom breast fed the 4 of us, and Jake told me some stories of Mom opening her blouse right in front of them to feed me like it was no big deal. They were so used to seeing mom feeding me that it didn't bother them. Breasts are nice to play with, but they're meant for feeding children, so feel free to nurse anywhere in the house. I accidentally walked in on you, and you're real discrete, so I don't think anyone else should have a problem."

"Heather walked right up to David, and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, you're so understanding. Let's eat, I'm starved." David quickly reheated the steaks and vegetables in the microwave, then brought the plates out to the table. After he said grace, they ate quietly. Later that evening, he was sitting down watching TV when Heather sat next to him, slipped his arm around her shoulder, and leaned against him while he watched TV. He understood that she just needed to feel his physical presence, and she didn't mean anything sexual by it. A couple of hours later, he reached for the remote, and she slid away and got up. "Thanks for holding me. Goodnight - see you tomorrow morning." David got up, took a shower and went to bed. He didn't know what was going on, but assumed that she just needed to feel someone close to her.

Chapter 86 - Moving Day

With the help of their new lawyers, Josh and Nick's houses were finished under budget and ahead of schedule. The law firm had hired an independent inspector to make sure the house was built to spec, resulting in some delays as they fixed any shortcomings, then all of a sudden the contractor went into overdrive when Mrs. Francis pointed out the penalty clause for not being finished on time. The General Contractor was forced to hire a local electrical contractor to install the AE system when he found out the crew he had hired was not familiar with the Outback System. The resulting losses made him mad, but he was caught between a rock and a hard place since the penalties for being late were several times his overtime costs and the contract was a firm fixed-price contract with no provision for cost-overruns, so he bit the bullet and did whatever it took to make sure it was done on time and to spec. They hired movers to move all the furniture and stuff to the new houses. Nick bribed some buddies of his to help move the cases of ammo and weapons after hours. They knew Josh was a contractor on a classified RDF project, so the US Government Property stencils on the crates didn't even rate a second glance. Once everything was in place, they drove to the furniture store in Sydney and ordered enough furniture to fill both houses. Josh had radios, scanners and every sort of communications device he could think of installed in the basement and connected to a 100 foot tower outside with the best antennas he could buy. He had computer interfaces so most of the functions were automated and controlled by the computer. He had several news-bot programs installed that did nothing but surf the Internet news sites for certain keywords that would alert him that all was not well with the world. It took him several weeks to adjust the program to eliminate false alarms yet still alert him to urgent emergencies.

Nick and Karen had equipped their trailers exactly like Josh and Sheila's, down to the last detail. Nick thought of several things Josh had missed, so they all added them to their trailers. The trailers were parked fully loaded, with the battery bank connected to a trickle charger, and facing out so they could hook them up and go with a minute's notice. Everything else that they had in storage was boxed in stackable waterproof cases so they could be quickly loaded into the trailer if they had time.

Early one Monday morning, Josh was awakened by a rumble, then saw the lamp in the center of the bedroom shaking. He told Sheila to get out of bed now and lay on the floor next to the bed just in case. Seconds later the shaking stopped. Sheila hadn't felt an earthquake before, but Josh was aware of them since he grew up in Alaska and knew what to do. They got quickly dressed, then the phone rang. Nick was on the line asking what that was.

"I think it was an earthquake, let me turn my computer on, and see if the news-bots found anything. I'll call you right back if it's anything significant."

Once he got downstairs and turned the computer on, the screen was flashing RED, which meant the bot had located a news story that warranted emergency notification. He clicked the box and

read the bad news. It was the USGS site, which had registered a huge earthquake right between New Zealand and Sydney, and they were forecasting a Tsunami Alert, with a possible wave height of 10-20 meters, and a landfall within 2 hours. Suddenly another web-bot overrode the USGS site with an urgent crawler message from a local TV station with a Tsunami Warning, and an evacuation order. Josh was glad he had picked this site for their new houses which was 500 meters above sea level and surrounded by thousand meter hills. There was no way any flood waters would make it into their valley. He called Nick back, and told him about the alert. Nick told him that his pager just went off, and when he called the number, he heard a recorded message telling him the base was on lock-down, and to find a secure location off-base and stay put until further notice. Nick laughed and said "That's one way to avoid going to work on Monday."

"Nick, I don't know about you, but I saw those pictures from Indonesia, and let me tell you, it's nothing to laugh at. Most of downtown Sydney will either be damaged by the wave or the resulting flooding, and I can guarantee the power will go out. I need to check our bug-out route just in case. I'll get back to you, but make sure neither one of you leave your house without letting me know first, we might have to bug-out if things get too hot."

While Josh reviewed their Bug out route, Sheila called her mom and dad. They advised taking the inland route to their place, and Sheila wrote a note for Josh. She told them they were fine for now, and would only come to their place if their Bunker was in jeopardy. With that, their phone call got cut off by the system, so Sheila replaced the receiver, walked into the office where Josh was working, slipped her parents' note next to his keyboard, kissed the top of his head and headed out. Josh saw the note, and decided to plot both routes into his GPS just in case. Sheila turned on the TV right in time to see live coverage of the huge Tsunami coming ashore from the viewpoint of the remote weather camera mounted high atop the TV station's 30-story building in downtown Sydney. With the airport only 21 feet above sea level, the wave did considerable damage, then continued inland, flooding most of the area around Sydney until it ran into the foothills. Most of the rivers experienced severe reverse flooding as the in-rushing seawater sought the path of least resistance. She hoped their SuperGoose wouldn't be damaged by the flood waters.

Josh was downstairs listening to the scanner. The police, fire and EMS were doing everything they could, but there wasn't enough of them around to take care of everyone. Josh was worried about what would happen when the Sheeple down in Sydney ran out of food and water. All the city water was infiltrated with salt water and undrinkable. Several people got sick despite warnings over the TV and Radio not to drink their tap water unless they could desalinate it. They even described a simple distillation desalinators, but virtually no one in the "big city" was prepared for anything more than a flat tire on the way to work. Even some of the prepared people died when their houses flooded. They'd sited their houses to prevent a normal flood, but never counted on a 50-foot plus Tsunami reversing the flow of the rivers and flooding them from the sea. Most of Sydney was low-lying, and the only people who were safe lived in the Blue Mountains, or other areas that were higher than 500 feet above sea level. All the grocery stores

and warehouses were flooded, and the warehouses along the harbor were destroyed in the Tsunami, and the goods they housed were either washed out to sea when the wave retreated, or piled up in huge mounds of debris with the combined wreckage of buildings, cars, and people. Streets in downtown Sydney quickly became impassable, those that still existed after the Tsunami and flooding. Millions of people were either dead or dying, or stranded without food and water. Military and civilian helicopters were performing heroic rescues, but barely made a dent in the carnage. Death was random and unpredictable. Josh and Sheila realized how fortunate they were that the Tsunami struck in the early morning. If it had been several hours later when they were at work, they would have either been dead or stranded. All the Evacuation order did was create pandemonium and crashes as everyone who could get into a car was driving like a madman to escape the tsunami, resulting in multiple car pileups, and death from stress-induced heart attacks, which further clogged the escape routes. A few people survived by escaping on foot who happened to live near high ground, and headed there as soon as they got the warning with whatever they could grab and carry on their backs. Rioting and looting weren't a problem right now, but they would be in the following days and weeks once the lawless elements surfaced, and desperate starving people fought for what little food and water were left in the area.

Josh knew that eventually people would head out to their area, but he felt reasonably secure. They had installed a 6-foot cyclone fence around the property with 3 strands of barbed wire on top, and keeping with the rural farm culture, told everyone they were raising a flock of free-range geese. Josh knew from experience in the SEALs that a flock of geese made better "watchdogs" than a canine watchdog. They would honk like crazy and aggressively mob and peck any intruder. If they didn't stop them, they each had a pair of K-9 trained German Shepards as backup. Both houses were wired with sensors and day/night cameras. Josh turned on the cameras in case survivors were in the area and watching the house. The walls were so thick and well insulated that a thermal camera wouldn't show the house as being occupied, and all the exhaust pipes for the heater and other heat-producing appliances were routed through heat exchangers that captured the excess heat, and exhausted air that was near outside temperature and humidity so there would be no tell-tale steam plumes from their pipes on a cold morning. The house was fully self-sufficient for energy and water, and the well was located in the basement away from any possible harm. Once the house was locked down, the only things moving outside were the geese and the wind turbines so the place looked empty.

Nick and Josh had converted several million dollars each into gold and silver coins right after the developer handed Nick a \$100 Million dollar check, and he paid Josh back the cost of his house. Nick was amazed at how much \$5 Million in 1oz Gold coins weighed. They bought money belts and all 4 of them carried 10 1-ounce Canadian Maple Leafs and 20 Liberty Silver dollars. Josh added 100 ounces of gold and silver coins to each vehicle's secure storage case. Nick did the same with his vehicles. To them it was "only money" but it could be a lifesaver if they had to buy something like fuel, and they weren't accepting cash, checks or credit cards.

2 days after the Tsunami, Nick was relieved to find out the base was on high ground, and had

survived OK. Planes were damaged, and some older buildings collapsed when their foundations were compromised. He found out that Josh's SuperGoose came through with flying colors, since the old hangar where they stashed it turned out to be the highest ground on the base. Except for some mud on the floor, everything was fine. Nick's wing commander told him to stay put, that the roads were impassable, and he wasn't considered "Essential Emergency Personnel" by the RAAF, since he didn't have any medical skills, or couldn't pilot a helicopter or heavy transport plane. Nick realized his days working for the RAAF were numbered, but he didn't care. He had been a fighter pilot, and a good one at that, and had done his time for Queen and Country. He was now the Administrative Assistant to the CO of the base, but right now, there wasn't much administrating to be done.

The next day, Josh spotted a small group walking up the road headed to their house. They stopped at the gate, and through the cameras, Josh could see they were unarmed and in pretty sad shape. One of them pushed the intercom button, and said "For God's sake, if you have any food or water, we've walked all the way from Sydney and we're out."

Josh pressed the PTT button "Hi there, we're short of supplies ourselves, but if you walk to the far corner of the lot, you'll see a water faucet with a cup hooked to it. Feel free to take all the water you need, but don't waste it. There's several farms further up the road that might be better able to help you. I'd recommend not trying to climb the fence, because if you make it past the geese, the dogs will get you."

"Thanks for the water mister, whoever you are." They walked to the end of the property, and sure enough, there was a hydrant with a steel cup attached with a string right outside the fence. They filled up all their water containers, drank their fill, walked across the street and peed in the bushes, then drank some more water, then waved and started walking down the road to the farmhouse they could see. Josh and Sheila had a discussion about what to do about survivors in an emergency like this. Josh didn't want to do anything, and Sheila, being from the water-scarce Outback argued the least they could do was give some thirsty people all the water they could drink, so Josh installed a hydrant, and a cut-off valve in the basement so if someone left the water running to try and force them to come out, he could turn it off from the basement. The pipe wasn't connected to anything else either.

Josh had anticipated survivors and brigands coming to their area, and had hit upon a novel idea when he realized that their double layer roof had a large crawl space between the flat concrete roof and the pitched roof that the solar panels were mounted to. He installed an "attic access" system including a drop-down ladder to the crawl space between the roofs. He built a 10x10 area between the roofs made of armored steel plate to protect him from gunfire, with a roof hatch that blended so well into the roofing material that even when he pointed it out to Sheila, she had to concentrate to realize it was there. He decided it would make a perfect "crow's nest" to convince attackers to move on and select an easier target. After the Tsunami, he brought up an M -16/M -203 with a day/night scope setup that Bear had shipped him a while ago, his Springfield Armory M -25 with the day and night scopes, and enough ammo to fight a pitched

battle. He had 20 40mm grenades ranging from smoke and CS to HEDP rounds, 1,000 rounds of 5.56 NATO, and 1,000 rounds of .308 Match ammo, with the first 200 rounds loaded in magazines, plus food, water, and a honey pot in case he had to stay up there longer than 8-10 hours. The cameras and surveillance equipment could cover the whole property, but not defend it once the shooting started. He taught Sheila how to work the surveillance cameras in the basement, and wired an intercom to the room so they could talk. He connected a lip mike and earpiece to his end so he would be able to hear and talk to her without making much noise. He had a switch on the intercom for a loudspeaker in case he decided to talk to the intruders. 2 days after the first group came through, he had a chance to try out his crow's nest when an armed group tried sneaking up on the house. The geese were honking and carrying on before they got within 100 yards of the fence. Josh woke Sheila, sat her at the console monitoring the cameras, and crawled up into his crow's nest. Right as he got comfortable, Sheila told him there was movement outside the fence line, and told him where. He set up the M -25 on the bipod, and spotted them in the Night Vision scope. As he scanned the group, they were a pretty motley crew, armed mostly with shotguns and pistols. Looking closer, he spotted a Police gun belt, but was pretty sure the puss-gut wearing it wasn't a cop. He looked more like a convict. That convinced Josh that they weren't there to collect for the Salvation Army, and had Sheila call Nick and tell him Red Alert, and the bearing and range to the threat. Nick had Josh install a matching Crow's nest in his roof, so he could defend his house too. They were out of range for Nick, but getting Nick up and alert would be a good idea, so he and Karen could watch his back. As one of them tried climbing the fence, Nick put a round right at the feet of the Puss-gut, and pressed the PA button. "One more step, and you're dead. Leave now and don't come back. If I see any of you again, I'll shoot you where you stand without warning."

The puss-gut must either have been drunk or stupid when he raised the barrel of his SKS and cranked off a round at the house, missing it by several feet. Josh's next round gave him a 3rd eye, and dropped him to the ground while spraying the rest of his gang that were behind him with what was left of his brains. They were over 400 yards from the house, and knew that anyone capable of blowing someone's head apart with 1 shot at over 400 yards was someone they didn't want to mess with, and ran away from the house as quickly as their feet could carry them. The next morning, Josh had a brilliant idea, and fashioned a hangman's noose, and hung the dead body from a tree across the road with a sign around his neck that read "Looter". He hoped anyone coming down that road would see that grisly reminder, and seek an easier target.

A couple of days later, an older man in an old beat up truck stopped outside and was admiring his handiwork. He walked over to the intercom and introduced himself. Josh recognized the name as one of his neighboring farmers. Josh walked out to the driveway, and shook the old farmer's hand after they had introduced themselves in person. He pointed with his thumb to the carcass of the dead looter hanging by a rope from the tree, and said "Nice shot. I like the noose and the note, kind of adds an interesting macabre touch to it. Hopefully once this is over, you'll cut him down and bury him."

"I kind of figured he'd serve as an object lesson to any other people coming up here to loot."

“I appreciate it, because anyone coming into the valley from Sydney have to go by your place first. Knowing you’re on guard makes it easier for me to get stuff done. You seem to be pretty selective about who you let by your place. A couple of days ago, a family knocked very politely on our door and asked for help saying you’d given them water but not much else. Judging by your setup here, I think you’re very well prepared, but it’s your choice how much you want to help. As long as they’re willing to work for the food, water and clothing we give them, I’ve got no problems helping.”

“Ray, hold on a second, and I’ll see what we can give you so if anyone else comes through, we can send them to your house knowing we at least contributed to helping them.”

“What I really need is basic staples to feed them.”

“Great, I’ll be right back.”

Josh jogged to the house, and came back 10 minutes later with several 5 gallon buckets of rice, beans, and wheat berries. He put them in the back of Ray’s truck, and Ray thanked him, climbed back into the truck, and said “I can see the antenna, so you must be a ham. Call me on the local 2-meter repeater frequency if you’re sending anyone our way, or if you need help.”

“Ok Ray, if you guys need anything, we’ll try to listen to the repeater as well.”

Ray backed out of Josh’s driveway and drove back home to his farm.

Josh was glad he had purchased a direct satellite connection to the internet when the lights flickered, and he knew that the Grid had gone down, maybe for a long while. He fully expected Sydney to lose power, but he had hoped that the grid would stay up, since they were almost 60 kilometers Northwest of Sydney. He checked the 2-meter radio, and the repeater was still up, so he called Ray for a radio check.

“Read you 5x5 Josh, the power’s out here, but our radio is on a huge battery backup, with enough power to last a week.”

“How you set for everything else?”

“We cook and heat with wood, and we’ve got wells and windmills. The tanks are full, so we’re fine.”

“OK, if those batteries start running low, let me know.”

“I’ve got a PTO generator for the diesel tractor and 500 gallons of diesel, so I can recharge my battery bank if necessary.”

“Ok Ray, looks like you’re set. If you need anything, let us know.”

“Just keep watching the front door.”

“Ok, Ray talk to you later.”

Once he turned off the radio, he started listening to the scanner, and what he heard made him call Nick and start preparations to bug out. Sydney was starting to burn. With the power out, there was no water pressure to fight fires, and with no means of heating and cooking, people were resorting to fires to keep warm and cook food, and most had no experience with setting and controlling fires, and they started getting out of hand. One guy tried to use gasoline in a pan to heat his soup, and the resulting explosion burned his house to the ground, and his neighbors’ as well. Fires were started by electrical shorts before the disconnects activated and automatically cut power to the city, and they were spreading too. Despite the City Fathers best attempts to disarm the population, if you had the cash, you could purchase a gun, and the various street gangs were now better armed than the local constables, since the hanky-wavers thought that the police shouldn’t have those bad “Assault Rifles” either. All over the city, good cops, firefighters, and EMS workers died as the gangs attacked the very people trying to help them. The home guard units were busy trying to rescue people, and weren’t equipped to fight a gang war anyway.

Josh looked at his routes, and realized that his best route to Sheila’s parents station skirted Sydney on the North side of the water, and hopefully there wasn’t as much gang activity on that shore. Their plan was to take their dogs and combat load all 4 Hummers and trailers. The geese would have to fend for themselves. They’d have sufficient water for a month left in their water tank, and since they were free-range anyway, they were used to scouring the ground for bugs to eat. Josh knew that if they were gone for more than a month, they probably weren’t coming back. While he was loading the Hummer, he saw something he missed before. He flipped a lever in the center of the roof, and the center of the roof retracted, leaving an opening the full width of the cab, and 3 feet deep, more than enough room to stand up with his LBV and body armor on. He went to the basement and distributed their stored LAW rockets equally among the 4 Hummers. He’d already shown Nick, Karen and Sheila how to aim and fire the LAW using a dummy training unit. Each Hummer had 6 rockets, their personal M -4 with the suppressor and M -203 grenade launcher mounted. Each of them also had 2 UZIs mounted under the seats with 4 magazines each. Josh hoped that would be enough firepower to keep the gangs away, then he had another idea, and grabbed an airless sprayer, and his stored paint cans. Using latex-based paint so he could wash it off later, he sprayed each Hummer and trailer with a credible facsimile of the NATO desert cammo pattern. Hopefully looking like a Military convoy would prevent more attacks than it would encourage.

Josh checked their GPS units, and all 4 had their primary, secondary, third and fourth backup routes programmed in and clearly marked. Josh realized a major hole in his preparations was that he had put all his eggs in one basket by selecting Brisbane as a refueling stop, since it was

only served by the coastal road and Brisbane itself was low enough to suffer from Tsunami damage. Hopefully the contractor followed his explicit instructions, and even if the hangar itself were destroyed, the sealed tanks of diesel and JP-5 would be intact. They didn't have enough fuel to make their outback station, and he couldn't locate any likely sources of diesel using his mapping software. He asked Sheila, and she said that there were just 2 fueling stations along their interior route, and they might be out of fuel if they didn't get their weekly delivery. That was not the news that Josh wanted to hear. His alternate would be to set up camp in the desert, and drill a well for water, which would last as long as they had power to run the well pump. He was glad that he had included the huge folding solar panel to keep the trailer's batteries charged in his storage plans for each trailer. He brought some extra plumbing connections in case they found a good well, and had more than 1 trailer available to double their water production. Once the on-board tanks were filled, they could fill their water 5-gallon water cans in a matter of hours since the RO units made 10 gallons of water per hour, or the ceramic and carbon filter made 60 gallons per hour. He'd built a do-dad to flush debris out of the well pipe before they started pumping, which included a pipe cap, some Teflon tape, and a Shraeder valve. He'd connect the air compressor to the valve and pressurize the pipe to about 60psi, driving all the dirt out the bottom of the pipe through the openings in the sand point, and hopefully blowing a clear pocket of water around the pipe head so they could draw a lot of water fairly fast through the pipe. It only took a minute to connect, so if they got clogged or started pumping a lot of sand, he should be able to blow it clear again.

Josh hoped he had planned for every eventuality, and prayed that they'd make it to Sheila's parents place OK. They spent the rest of the day loading essential items like food, water, clothing, weapons and ammunition in the 4 vehicles and trailers. Josh made sure the load was combat-loaded, so if they lost a vehicle and trailer on the way, they wouldn't lose something critical. He sat down and told Nick, Karen and Sheila of his plan, and his discovery of the hatch Q had built into their Hummers. Nick came up with RDF kevlar helmets and armbands indicating they were MP's to complete their masquerade. He even had fake orders generated for an emergency convoy into the outback in case they ran into a roadblock. Josh suggested keeping the UZIs out of sight unless they were in a last ditch defense of their vehicles, and to use the M - 4 with the grenade launchers instead. The LAW rockets in each vehicle were for clearing any roadblocks put up by roving gangs. Josh told them the ROE was anyone who was armed was fair game, and their priority was to escape by any means necessary, and not to stop for anything, especially a mob of unarmed people, who could flip over a Hummer just by the sheer mass of humanity. Josh looked straight at Sheila and Karen when he said that during the Rodney King riots, people who stopped instead of mowing down the rioters were pulled from their vehicles and beaten to death. They were both pregnant, and that hopefully would increase their defensive resolve, and push their normal compassionate natures aside. Josh decided to take lead, followed by Sheila and Karen, with Nick bringing up the back, since he had combat experience as well, even though it was at 30,000 feet against MIGs. He took Nick aside and explained they were all that stood between the women and the mobs, and to use deadly force at the first sign of trouble, none of this "firing over their heads" BS. Nick gulped when he saw the look in Josh's eyes, and realized he was deadly serious.

When he was finished with the briefing, they ate dinner, and went to bed early, Josh wanted to be on the road at first light. Hopefully the gangs slept late. After breakfast, he made sure everyone drank their fill of water and used the bathroom, since there would be no pit stops until they reached the outback. They donned their BDUs and bullet-resistant vests, then finally their LBVs. Sheila and Karen felt like the Michelin Man since they were each 3 months pregnant. Josh took Sarge, his favorite K-9 companion in his Hummer, and Sheila took Bruno, her favorite dog in hers. Nick and Karen loaded their dogs in their Hummers, and they drove out their driveways, then locked the gates behind them. Josh gave Ray a quick call telling him they were bugging out, and that the front door wasn't guarded anymore. Ray wished them well, and said he'd look after their homes as best as he could.

The sight that greeted them as they descended the hill into Sydney was right out of Dante's Inferno, and Josh was glad that he had installed the brackets that held their M -4s with the barrel pointing straight up, a round in the chamber, and a HEDP round in the breech of the M -203. Before they left, he told everyone "Lock and load, we're in Indian country." Josh and Sarge scanned the scene ahead of them for danger. Josh had learned to trust Sarge's instincts and knew that 2 sets of eyes were better than 1. On an impulse he opened the roof hatch. No sooner had he sat back down when Sarge whooffed, and Josh saw what he was barking at. 50 yards in front of them was an improvised barricade of cars, and he saw some heads peeking around the backs wearing bandanas. He had a solution for that problem, hit the brakes, and as soon as the Hummer was stopped, popped up through the hatch with his M -4, fired a HEDP round through one of the cars in the blockade, and popped back down quickly to avoid the shrapnel blast that followed. When the smoke cleared, both vehicles were burning, and several gang members were missing large parts of their anatomy. The few that survived were running away as fast as they could. Josh got on the radio, and said "button up" then closed the hatch, locked his seatbelt, and put the bumper of his Hummer against the rear quarter panel of 1 of the cars and pushed it out of the way. Once he had a big enough hole, he told them "follow me" and he accelerated rapidly to clear the area. Once they were clear, he reached up and opened the hatch again. Having it open was a risk he was willing to take to gain a fraction of a second's advantage against any further attackers. A couple of miles down the road, he heard a couple of pings against the body, and knew they were under fire, and then he saw a small mob of maybe 100 people trying to rush the convoy and steal what they had. He radioed "Charge" and accelerated directly at the crowd. The mob hadn't anticipated this tactic, and scattered just in time to avoid getting steam rolled by a short convoy of Hummers.

They made it the next 20 miles without anything more than some small arms fire impacting the Hummer's armor. Josh was glad he had spent the money now, since even those 5.56 and 30-caliber rounds would cause serious damage to an un-armored car, and injuries to the occupants. The next roadblock they ran into was a serious threat, with a tractor-trailer blocking the road, and a sizable army of gangsters behind cover. Josh knew that until they took out the roadblock and whittled this gang down to size, backing up would be fatal. He picked up a LAW rocket, opened it, then popped up and fired the rocket into the truck. He felt several rounds striking his vest while he was exposed, but he knew that if he didn't take out that tractor trailer, and get the

gang whittled down to size, they were dead. He popped back down with the empty launcher, and came back up with his M -4 after radioing "Delta" to the rest of the convoy, which would execute a pre-planned barrage of 40mm rounds. Josh fired to his 10 o'clock, Sheila to her 2 o'clock, Karen to Josh's 8 o'clock, and Nick to his 4 o'clock. While Josh reloaded, he surveyed the scene before him. Some gang bangers were dead, others were regrouping behind cover to attack. He decided to put a stop to that with his next grenade. The car they were hiding behind blew up, throwing shrapnel all around, cutting Josh on his cheek. Now that the group was cut down to size, Josh called and told Nick to turn around and go two blocks to their right and see if the way was clear, and if not, Karen would check two blocks to their left, and so on until they found a route out of the jam they were in. Nick radioed back that they were clear on his route. Josh said "Go", then Karen and Sheila followed Nick. Finally Josh got out of there and Nick was the temporary point until they came to a point where they could switch. Nick reached into his kit, and slapped a large band-aid on the cut, since he didn't have time to stop and do it right. He called on the radio "Sitrep", and got 4 Ok's back.

While they drove, Josh took the opportunity to reload his 40mm grenade bandoleer full of HEDP rounds and reached into the back seat to open the case of grenades, when he looked out the back window and saw a truck full of armed gang members following them. He grabbed the radio and said "Back door" then stopped long enough to pop up through the hatch, turn around, and nail the truck with a 40mm grenade, which struck the radiator and detonated, destroying the truck and wiping out the gangsters. He turned around, grabbed the radio, and said "Situation resolved" and stepped on the throttle to catch up.

Chapter 87 - FUBAR

They finally cleared the city only to discover that the bridge over a small tributary to a major river that emptied into the bay at Sydney was too badly damaged to risk crossing. Josh got out to inspect the bridge on foot, and he could clearly see the piers and pilings were knocked off plumb by the force of the flood waters, and debris was piled up against the bridge. The concrete roadbed had gaping cracks and holes in it, and Josh could see daylight through several holes. They unrolled a topo map looking for a bypass when Sheila suggested a ford about a mile up river that should be passable since they all had their snorkels mounted. Josh mounted the snorkels a couple of days ago to match the look of the Military Hummers, now that little detail could wind up saving their lives. He explained what they were going to try to Nick and Karen, and pointed out it was a choice of the ford, or going back through the gauntlet they had just gone through. Sheila found a 2-wheel track leading upstream, and they hoped to the fording spot. After half an hour of slow wheeling, they arrived at what must be the ford. At least the ground was fairly flat on both sides, so they wouldn't have to climb a riverbank on top of everything else. The tributary was only about 20 feet wide, and he spotted a huge tree on the other side, which gave him an idea. He talked it over with everyone, and decided to park his rig on this side, free-spool his winch while he crossed the water, and connect the cable to the tree on the other side with a tree-saver. He'd then have to re-cross then drive the rig across while winching in to keep the cable taut. Once he was across, he'd turn around, anchor the rig to the tree, and toss the cable across the creek, and while they drove over, he'd winch them across in case they got stuck.

Josh unlocked his winch, took off everything but his boots and BDU shorts, and waded across. The water was cold, but not any worse than what he'd endured during Hell Week. Once he was across, he connected a tree saver to the tree, and connected the hook to the tree saver, then had Nick take up the slack. Going back across was much easier, and he idled down to the water's edge, then engaged the winch. Once the winch started pulling him, he released the brakes and idled through the water. The only scary moment was when the trailer tried to float away, since it was sealed and buoyant, even with the heavy load. Once he was on the opposite shore, he got out and unhooked, then carefully turned the rig around, and using a short choker cable, connected the tree saver to the rear bumper of the Hummer, then free-spooled the cable off and threw it across the water. Sheila was next in line, and Nick connected the cable to her towing clevis, and she idled down to the water just like Josh did. Once the cable started pulling her, she released the brakes and idled into the water. Her trailer floated briefly too, and then she was on the other shore. There was just enough room to get by, so she drove past once Josh disconnected the cable. He tossed the cable across and pulled Karen across next, then finally Nick. Once they were all across, Josh secured his winch and got fully dressed, including his BRV and LBV. Several hours later, they made their way back to the main road and drove as far away from Sydney before stopping for the night at a clearing 50 yards off the road. Josh told them it would be a cold camp with no lights or unnecessary noise. After surviving riots and Mother Nature, eating MRE's in the dark wasn't that big of a deal. They got some sleep and trusted the dogs to

alert them to danger.

The next morning, they took turns watering trees and standing guard, then they quickly ate another MRE, then got back into their Hummers to put some mileage between them and Sydney.

The roads they were driving on were little more than gravel tracks, yet Sheila said that this was the quickest way to her parent's station without going through Brisbane, and they already decided that wasn't a good idea, since the hangar was probably destroyed. Finally they came to a small town that Sheila said was called Dubbo, Josh spotted a truck stop, and it looked like they might actually have fuel, They'd only traveled 200 miles, but Josh was determined to fill up whenever possible. The place was ran by an old desert rat who charged twice what the going rate for fuel was in Sydney, almost \$4 per gallon. Josh asked him if he took checks or credit cards, and the old man laughed. "Cash, gold or silver only." Josh decided to save his gold and silver for a real emergency and gave the old man 5 \$100 bills thinking they could use 125 gallons of diesel between the 4 rigs. All that heavy 4-wheeling had cut into their gas mileage, and they needed the 125 gallons to fill their main tanks. Josh asked Nick if he could squeeze any diesel into his trailer, and he said that they had enough room for 25 gallons between the two, since he didn't fill them to the gills. Josh was glad he found out now, and gave the owner another \$100 bill and filled Nick and Karen's trailers, then topped theirs off with the remaining 5 gallons. They left the station with their diesel tanks as full as they could get, and their bladders empty since he had a bathroom that wasn't too dirty. Sheila brought some disinfectant wipes in with her and Karen to clean the toilet seat. They left and pressed onward to Sheila's parents station. Sheila had recommended at turn northwards toward Bourke based on what the old man had told her about the fuel situation, it was amazing what a beautiful woman can do to an old man just by flirting with him. He told her that the roads to the west didn't get their fuel shipments, and the last fuel truck was stranded in Alice Springs after delivering his station and the one in Bourke since the depot in Brisbane was still flooded. Josh felt badly for the man, since he'd taken every precaution except locating his business on high ground. Seems the Terrorists didn't get him, but the Tsunami did! From Bourke, there was a network of roads leading all over Queensland westward to her parents station just west of the border between Queensland and the Northern Territory.

At their current speed, they would be to Bourke some time tomorrow. Josh checked his map and realized they were traveling on Mitchell Highway. They needed to find some place to stay overnight, so Josh asked Sheila over the radio if she knew of any campgrounds on Mitchell Highway between here and Bourke. She said there should be a private campground with flush toilets and showers about an hour north closer to Nyngan. Josh looked at his watch, and thought that would be about perfect. Sheila called on the radio when they got close, and they were glad to see that the campground was open. Josh booked 2 adjacent campsites with water and electric hookups for 2 nights, in case they wanted to rest and recuperate from their long journey. They parked their Hummers so they were surrounding their campsite and they could pitch the tents between the rigs to give them some protection from any incoming small arms fire, and strung the tarps between the 4 Hummers, giving them a huge shady area to pitch the tents under. Once they were all set, they left the dogs guarding the site, and walked past several sites to use the

bathrooms and the showers. With that out of the way, they made a big pot of stew for dinner, since it only used 1 burner and pot, then fed the dogs and played with them. At dusk they built a small fire in the fire ring with the provided wood, and sat around socializing.

They were up at first light, and once they were dressed, Sheila made breakfast of powdered eggs mixed with TVP bacon, and dehydrated potato hash. They all pitched in cleaning up. After breakfast they looked around, and it seemed they had the campground to themselves except for the park manager. Josh went up to talk to him, found out his name was Eric he was a retired member of the Royal Marines, and they talked for a while about “military life” and he gave Josh some critical information. The reason the campground was deserted was there were some heavily armed brigands roaming around in the Outback after the Tsunami knocked out the power at a nearby prison. There was a huge escape, and some of the most dangerous criminals in Australia were roaming the outback raping and Pillaging. The only good news was they were armed with small arms only. Josh told Eric about his Hummer, and he told Josh that if he had a Ma Deuce or a M -60 to mount on it, that they’d outgun the brigands who were driving around in unarmored pickups armed with M-16's, SKS, shotguns, 30-caliber rifles, and various pistols. Josh asked him if he knew of a place he could purchase an M -60 or Ma Deuce with at least 1,000 rounds of ammo.

Eric was evasive, but finally admitted he could get Josh just about anything he wanted for cash, gold or silver. Since he had over a million dollars of gold and silver with him, he asked if he could get his hands on 2 full-auto Ma Deuces with 2 spare barrels each, and 6,000 rounds of belted ammo. He realized Josh was dead serious, and asked him if he had the proper mount for his Hummers. Josh said that Q didn’t provide one with the Hummers.

“Who the heck is Q?”

Josh explained the body shop that he had build the Hummers and trailers, and Eric laughed “I’ve met a few old codgers who reminded me of Q, but this guy sounds like he’s from Central Casting! I’ll see what I can do, but it will take me until tomorrow to get everything you need, and I’m pretty sure they will want gold.”

“What’s gold trading for now?”

“Last I heard was \$600 an ounce. I imagine if they have what you want, they’ll probably want around \$100 grand for both including 2 thousand rounds of belted ammo and the pedestal mounts for your Hummers.”

“See if you can get combat load. If all they have is Ball, that’s OK but I’d prefer combat loaded belts.”

“I see you really do know your way around the old broad.”

“I’ve fired the Ma Deuce in training exercises on board the Mark V.”

“That’s one sweet craft, I wish the Royal Marines would have bought some.”

“It might take me a day or two to get them and get them installed. You’re more than welcome to stay here, matter of fact I feel safer with you guys around just in case those brigands show up.”

Josh told Eric to go ahead and get the M2's if he could, and as much ammo as he could, at least 2K and not more than 10K worth of belted ammo in ammo cans. Josh walked back to the campground and gave everyone a heads-up. Next he pulled out his shoe phone and called Sheila’s parents. They already knew about the Brigands, and had taken the appropriate precautions. Jack warned Josh that the Brigands were reported to be somewhere between where they were and the station, and to keep a sharp eye out. Josh ended the call to save batteries, and talked to Sheila, Nick and Karen. From that point onward, they’d carry their M-4s wherever they went and wear their BRV and LBV unless they were going to the bathroom, and when they were going to use bathrooms or showers, at least 1 member of their group should stay armed and geared up, and in plain sight of the rest of them. They groaned, but Josh said it was either that, or no showers, etc. Sheila realized that they were in deadly danger, and talked to Karen later. The 3 of them started taking security seriously after Sheila had that little talk with them, especially when she explained to Karen in graphic detail what would happen to her if she were captured alive. For all intents and purposes, they were wide out in the open in a very indefensible position. If it weren’t for the water for showers and toilets, they’d be better in the open desert.

The next day Eric showed up with 2 Browning M2 Heavy Barrel machine guns in their original crates including cleaning kits, a re-linker, manuals, a gauge set for head space and timing, and 2 spare barrels each. Eric had a crate next to it filled with ammo boxes full of 200 rounds of linked combat mix. The crate contained 20 boxes of 200 rounds. Eric explained that if they went through 4,000 rounds of ammo, they would have shot their barrels out, and would be better off with an APC. Josh realized how big and heavy that case was, and was glad that Eric was using his head. They distributed the ammo among the 4 Hummers, then Eric showed Josh how to head space and time the weapons. Once they were finished, Eric showed him 2 mounts designed to fit the Hummer, which included a short pedestal and a travel lock which kept the M2 from bouncing on rough roads. It mounted behind the hatch Q built into the Hummer, but Josh realized that they could fire over the back of the Hummer as well as the front with the huge hatch, and the bulk of the trailer would make him harder to hit when he was firing the big gun. Eric knew exactly what he was doing when he mounted the pedestal to the Hummer, drilling several half-inch holes through the Kevlar armor and the thick-wall oval tubing that made up the heavy duty roll cage that Q built into the Hummers he built for them. When he finished, Eric said you could practically lift the Hummer from that pedestal mount, so the Ma Deuce would be fine up there. The 3 men horsed the M2 onto the pedestal mount once Eric attached the MK64 gun cradle to the machine gun.

Once they were finished, Eric showed them how to attach an ammo box to the left side of the gun mount and lock it in place. With the box locked into place, Eric showed them how to load the gun and fire it. He suggested leaving the sights set at the 1000 yard setting, then walked them both through loading and unloading the gun. He then told them to leave the gun half-loaded in automatic mode, so all you had to do was to jerk the slide handle back once to fire. Once that was accomplished, he had them disconnect a Hummer from the trailer, and drive it out a ways to test fire the gun and get them used to shooting it. By the time they had fired 1 box of ammo each, they were pretty sure they could defend themselves. They wouldn't get any prizes for accuracy, but Eric said that if they could hit a pickup at half a mile, they would be way ahead of the game. Josh's superior shooting skills were obvious when after 3 short bursts, he fired a short burst into an old abandoned truck Eric used for target practice from time to time, which was ½ mile away from their shooting position. Nick needed most of the box, but his last burst hit the truck, and they said that was good enough. They drove back to the campground, locked a fresh box of ammo onto the gun carrier, and made ready to leave the next morning. They were tired of resting and recuperating, and wanted to get to Sheila's folks place soon in case they were attacked. With the armed Hummers, they'd stand a better chance of defending the ranch than just the 2 of them with their M -25 rifles and Uzis.

The next morning before they pulled out, Josh asked Eric if he'd like to come to Sheila's parents station with them at least until things got back to normal. Josh realized that Eric really knew the Ma Deuce, and Nick would basically be wasting ammo. Eric lived in a trailer, and all his stuff was well hidden, so he could come back to it later. He realized once they left, he was a sitting duck if any brigands showed up, since the park was totally indefensible, and the huge sign would attract people for miles, in this case probably the wrong sorts. He decided he'd be safest with them, and told Josh he had to get some stuff, and he'd be right back. 10 minutes later, he drove up in a diesel IH Traveler with a Browning M2 HB mounted on a pedestal in the back just like the WWII Desert Rats. Josh was standing there with his mouth open. With Eric's machine gun, they could put out some serious fire power. He had to re-think his battle plans. Josh had everyone gather around, and he asked Eric if he had any ideas about defense.

"Since your Hummers are pretty much bullet proof, you should be point and rear guard. I should ride in the middle were I hopefully won't get too much incoming, yet I'll be able to provide defensive firepower for the Sheila's Hummers."

Nick and Josh started to snicker a little.

"Ok, what's so funny?"

Sheila stood up, and held out her hand and said "Hi, I'm Sheila!"

"Young lady, your dad has an interesting sense of humor - I'd like to meet him."

Josh told Eric about his ideas for defending them against any attack when they were on the road.

Eric made a few modifications, then Josh checked Eric's radio. It was an older model of the radio that they had installed in their Hummers, so Josh told him the frequencies they were using, and he set the radio for their common frequency, and the power switch at LOW. Next Josh explained their radio calls, and Eric was taking notes. Once they were ready, everyone suited up, including Eric, who, Josh was glad to see, had basically the same equipment as they did, except he had a CAR-15 instead of a full-auto suppressed M -4. He had an M -203 grenade launcher, and his vest pockets were full of 20-round magazines and 40mm grenades. Josh could see a 20-round bandoleer full of HEDP 40mm grenades sitting on the seat next to Eric, so he knew Eric was set. His pistol looked like a Colt Commander, but he didn't have time to check. They got into their Hummers, started their engines, and Josh lead the way to Burke.

They arrived in Burke later that afternoon, and managed to fill their diesel tanks with fuel, except this time the owner was asking for Silver or Gold only. Josh guessed that the Australian Dollar wasn't worth much if the banks were closed. Before they drove off, Eric told Josh that he thought it was too far to try and drive to Sheila's parents station tonight, so they should stay in the desert that night. He knew of an isolated box canyon that would be more defensible than sleeping in the open desert. Josh asked Sheila, since she knew the area better than he did. She knew which canyon Eric was referring to, and since it was in the dry season, it would be safe. During the Monsoon, the canyon was subject to flash flooding, and would be a deathtrap. They drove down the road, crossed from New South Wales into Queensland, and made the canyon turnout before nightfall. Since people camped in the canyon all the time, Josh wasn't too worried about leaving tire tracks, since they would blend in with past tracks, and it would take an expert tracker to tell when the trail was last used.

20 miles later, they arrived at the mouth of the box canyon. When they were to Sheila's favorite camping site, she radioed the convoy to stop. She got out and looked for signs of water while Josh, Nick and Eric set up the drilling rig. She pointed out a likely spot, and they set up on that spot. The rig worked like a charm until several hours later when Josh heard a loud banging noise, and ran to shut off the drill. He could see the pipe hadn't moved since the last time he added pipe. They were down maybe 10 feet, and when he sent a weighted string down the hole, it came back dry. Josh was frustrated, and thought they'd hit a bolder. Since they had enough water if they skipped showers, he decided it wasn't worth making that much noise for hot showers. Sheila and Karen were disappointed until Josh offered them the use of the Solar shower, but they were limited to 3 gallons each. Karen protested until Sheila told her that she'd tell her how to get a good shower with only 3 gallons of water. They parked their rigs in a loose square again for security, and stretched the tarps between them and pitched the tents under the tarps, then Josh erected the shower enclosure for the ladies' modesty. Sheila suggested bathing in a bathing suit unless Karen was used to such primitive conditions, telling her that the tarp covering the shower might blow up in a sudden breeze, leaving her standing there like "Hot Lips Hoollihan" in MASH. Remembering the scene, Karen decided that bathing in a bathing suit might be a good idea, even if she didn't get as clean as she would have liked. Sheila went first, then Karen took a shower without incident after the water heated up again. They ate MREs for dinner, since they wanted to be able to evacuate the site as quickly as possible during an

emergency, and didn't set up anything that wasn't essential to sleeping overnight. At first light, they took everything down and packed up.

They drove back to the road, and made it most of the way to Sheila's parents place when Josh heard "Back Door - Big time!" Josh said "Execute Alpha" and the convoy accelerated to their maximum speed. They slowed down for the next right turn, then Josh watched his odometer, and when they were well past the turn, they couldn't see the attackers any more, and he said "Now!" Josh pulled off the left side of the shoulder, while Sheila and Karen stopped 50 feet past him, crossing the T of the road with their vehicles. Eric pulled his rig between the 2 groups, and Nick pulled up next to Josh. The 3 of them quickly manned their Ma Deuces and racked the charging handles back, arming the guns. Nick and Josh would engage the attackers at long range, forcing them to stop, while Sheila and Karen got behind their rigs where it was relatively safe, and use their 40mm grenade launchers as area weapons, dropping rounds at maximum range around the attacker's vehicles to kill as many as possible, and keep the rest from moving. Eric's job was to prevent any attackers from flanking them, and cover their 6. Josh hoped 3 machine guns would be enough to decimate the attackers. He had heard of the viciousness of some of their attacks, and didn't want to leave any of them alive.

As soon as they were behind their guns, Josh engaged the lead truck at almost half a mile, and the short burst blew through the radiator and wrecked the motor. He aimed his next burst at the driver and it looked like he scored. Nick saw trucks trying to get around the wrecked truck, and hoped he could hit them. His first group was short, so he raised his point of aim slightly, and walked a long burst into first one truck then another. Josh saw what he was doing, and realized they had ammo to burn, and started firing longer bursts. Soon all the vehicles were burning, but the brigands weren't out of the fight yet. Dozens of choppers came roaring up the road, and were too agile for them to successfully engage with the Ma Deuces. Quickly they got within range of the M-203s, and Josh turned and waved his hand to his wife, who recognized the signal, and they started firing rounds as quickly as they could. They were firing almost blind, so Josh raised and lowered his hand to indicate range changes. Josh was amazed that the girls were hitting the road at that range, he had guessed that most of their grenades would land harmlessly out on the desert, but after they got the hang of it, most of their rounds wound up in the roadway. Josh reached into his cab when they got close enough and started engaging with his grenade launcher and firing short bursts from his M -4. During the attack, Eric had seen the motorcycles coming, and abandoned his machine gun, and grabbed his CAR-15, the rest of this battle would be up close and personal. Right when they thought things were over, Josh looked up and Nick was slumped over. Eric saw the problem, and ran forward between the Hummers to engage the remaining MZB's while Josh got Nick down on the ground and started working on him. He was afraid that Nick might have been dead by the way he was slumped over, but he just had a bad shoulder wound. He couldn't see any obvious bone fragments, so he hoped it was a through and through wound to the meat of the shoulder. He started an IV of Ringers to replace the lost blood volume, and gave him a syringe of Morphine, since they were a long way from help. He pulled Nick's battle dressing out of his right thigh pocket, and bandaged the shoulder as well as possible while under fire. Once he was stabilized, he picked up his M -4 to make sure all the

MZBs were dead. He shot several anyway, he was furious that these dirtbags almost cost his friend's life!

Once they were sure that all the MZBs were dead, Josh went back to check on Nick only to find Sheila and Karen tending him. They had managed to load him back into the passenger seat of his Hummer and shut the doors just in case. Eric and Josh walked back to survey the damage, and were amazed that they'd made it through so well until they checked Eric's Traveler, which was had several bullet holes, and was leaking radiator fluid from a lucky shot. He tried to crank the motor, but it wouldn't run, so they must have gotten something critical. Josh yelled for him to take Nick's Hummer and follow them. They transferred as much stuff to the other Hummers as possible, including all of Eric's weapons and ammo. He removed the Ma Deuce from the truck by disconnecting the pintle mount from the pedestal, and loaded it in a trailer. Once they were ready to go, Josh loaded a 40mm round into his grenade launcher, and making sure they were a safe distance away told Eric "I hate to do this, but we need to try and destroy your vehicle in case we left anything useful behind. Don't worry, I'll buy you another 1." With that, he fired into the open window of the truck, and the grenade exploded, setting the truck ablaze. They climbed back aboard their Hummers and drove to Sheila's parents place.

Josh was fuming on the drive to Sheila's parents place, then he thought of Nick, and realized he wasn't qualified to do exploratory surgery on the shoulder to make sure the bullet didn't hit bone when he remembered that Ralph and Samantha were. He grabbed his Shoe phone, and dialed Ralph's number. He told Ralph what had happened, what he did for Nick, and the fact that any hospitals in the area were heavily damaged in the Tsunami. He told Ralph that they were headed to Susan's parents station in the Outback and gave him the GPS coordinates. He told him that it had a runway big enough to land a 737, and thousands of gallons of JP-5. Ralph said he'd talk to Ron and get there as quick as possible. In this case, it would be easier for the doctors to come to the patient, instead of vice versa. Ralph gave Josh a long list of instructions, which Josh already knew, but he didn't interrupt Ralph in case he said something Josh had forgotten. As soon as they hung up, Ralph called Ron, who called Anchorage and chartered their fastest private jet for a medical emergency flight to Australia. The leasing agent checked, and they had a Gulfstream V available with the required range. Ron told them to get it ready, they'd be there in 2 hours. Ralph yelled for Samantha to grab whatever she might need to do an exploratory or reconstructive surgery on a shoulder with a small-caliber gun shot wound, a suitcase, and her Militia gear. Ralph guessed that Nick was hit by a SS-109 bullet, which tended to make little holes when they went through and through. As long as it didn't hit anything major, Nick should be fine.

Once Samantha was all packed, including their Militia gear, since they might be jumping into a war zone, Jake met them at the plane, and flew them at max cruise to Anchorage. When they landed, the G was already idling and ready to take off. They loaded their gear aboard, buckled in, and the lightly loaded G took off, flying as fast as the range to Hawaii would allow. 5 hours later, they landed in Honolulu international. Since they were flying a Medical Emergency flight, they were quickly serviced and in the air an hour later, on the long leg to Australia.

Josh and the rest of the convoy made it to the station right before dark. First they got Nick comfortable, and Josh checked on him, then called Ralph's satellite phone number. He gave Ralph an update on Nick's condition, and Ralph suggested adding a Morphine drip to the IV for pain, but at a very low dosage level since they'd be there in 8 hours for surgery. Josh promised to taper off the morphine after 6 hours so he could tolerate the anesthesia. Once Nick was stable and resting as comfortably as possible, Josh introduced Eric to Jack. It turned out that they served in the same Royal Marines Company, and vaguely remembered each other. It was like Old Home weekend for the two old Marines. Karen was worried about her husband until Josh told her that Nick's injury wasn't life threatening, and a great emergency surgeon and an ER Doc were flying there to care for him, and would be there in 8 hours. Karen was glad that Josh had low friends in high places, since there wasn't much medical help available in the Eastern half of Australia right now. Once they were finished, Sheila held Josh and cried. She wasn't used to being in a major firefight, and her emotions were whipsawing from raging anger at the SOBs that had tried to kill them to remorse for killing them, to fear for Nick's life, and an empty drained feeling that Josh knew was due to the huge adrenalin dump combat causes, and the inevitable crash afterward. He suggested Karen and Sheila go to bed immediately, and Sheila told Josh she wouldn't be able to sleep without him. Eric told Josh to go ahead, he'd keep an eye on Nick, and if his vitals changed, he'd wake him up. The two old warhorses moved their chairs into the room where Nick was sleeping, and continued their conversation. Eric told Jack about the firefight, and how Josh had acted under fire. Jack realized that Josh was a seasoned combat veteran, even at his relatively young age. He was glad that Eric had the presence of mind to charge the MZB's positions so Josh could care for Nick. Jack knew how deadly the 40mm grenade was since he carried a M -79 "thumper" in the Royal Marines.

Chapter 88 - Homeward Bound

9 hours after they left Honolulu, they landed at Sheila's parents station. Sheila drove out with her dad to meet them, and asked the pilots to come with them, since they'd have return passengers in a day or so, and they'd make it worth their time. When they got to the Station, Ralph and Samantha took over Nick's care, and came out an hour later.

"Why did you call us to come all the way over here, that was a simple bullet wound, you're trained to treat it as well as we are?"

"When I called you, I was in no condition to do anything more than simple first aid. I was shaking like a leaf from Adrenalin, and I could barely get the IV in. I wasn't about to go poking around my best friend's shoulder shaking like a leaf."

Right then, Nick's pager buzzed, and Josh picked it up. He called the number on it, and it was General Ratliff.

"Josh, I'm glad it's you. I'm afraid I've got some bad news. Commander Klaus wasn't promoted, so he'll be Riff'ed in 90 days. Also, the base is so heavily damaged that we're going to have to suspend your consulting contract indefinitely."

"General, actually that works for me. We went through hell getting to Sheila's parents place in the Outback, and Nick was shot in the shoulder. He'll recover, but he won't be doing any typing for a while. Do you have a working runway so I can get the SuperGoose out of there?"

"I was going to suggest just that, and we'll ship all the spare parts and your personal effects back to Allakaket at the government's cost if you wish."

"That would be nice of you. We've got a G sitting here, maybe they can give me a lift to the RAAF base if you could refuel them."

"Ok Josh, I'll have someone clean up your SuperGoose and make it ready for flight."

"It probably won't be today, I have to ask Nick what he wants to do. Hopefully he'll fly back with us to Allakaket."

"Under the circumstances that would be best. Sydney's a disaster area, and it's not going to get any better any time soon."

Josh thanked the General and hung up. He gave Karen the bad news, and she said that Nick was expecting it anyways, and was eligible for retirement, so he was going to retire anyway. He asked her if she thought Nick would like to live in Allakaket. Karen said he needed to ask Nick,

but she didn't have any problems moving, especially since most of Sydney was destroyed, there wasn't anything to stay there for. Josh called Mrs. Francis' phone number, and was amazed when someone from the law office answered the call. They explained that all the incoming lines to Sydney were forwarded to their Perth office. Josh told them to find buyers for both his and Nick's houses, as is. The receptionist was amazed that their houses had survived the flood, and the 2 general partner's houses were destroyed in the flood, and they needed houses in Sydney so they could rebuild the law firm, and take care of their Sydney clients. Jack told her where they were, and quoted a ridiculously high \$1.5 Million USD each, cash or wire transfer to his bank in Allakaket. She wrote everything down, and if they were interested, or found another buyer, she'd call them back. 2 hours later, she called him back and said that the partners would take both houses as is, as long as they were still standing, and not damaged. They would be flying into Sydney tomorrow. Josh asked if they could meet him at the RAAF base, and he'd fly them to the house. He knew the road out front of their houses was more than wide enough to land the SuperGoose, and there were no real obstructions. He gave the receptionist all the information, and she said they'd be there, or call him by 0800 tomorrow.

Later that afternoon, Nick was awake and alert, and asking questions. Josh decided to give it to him all at once.

"Nick, your boss, General Ratliff called. He had some bad news. You weren't on the promotions list, and will probably be RIFed in the next 90 days. Your shoulder will be fine, you took a through and through wound in that last gun battle with the MZB's. Ralph and Sam flew here from Alaska to check on you, and they said you're OK, and you should recover 100%. If you want to move to Allakaket with us, I've got an offer of \$1.5 Million for each of our houses from the General Partners of our law firm. Samantha said you were OK to travel tomorrow, if you laid in the seat and took it easy. Sheila and I will be flying the SuperGoose back to Allakaket, and will arrive a couple of days after you."

"Ok, if I'm going to be retired, might as well be someplace safe like Allakaket."

"Nick, I hope you enjoy snow, because that's all you'll see 6 months of the year."

"Actually, it would be a nice change from all the desert and salt air. Besides, from what you tell me, you guys have got quite an armed camp set up there."

"The JSOC retired to Allakaket years ago, and before he did, he transferred tons of military hardware there. My dad met him during a T&E session for the M -200, and they became friends."

"Ok, Karen and I will fly back tomorrow in the Gulfstream, and you guys will join us in a couple of days."

"I need to make some calls and take care of some stuff, but I'll make sure to see you before you

go.”

Right as Josh finished, Nick fell asleep again. He called his Dad, and asked if the 4 of them could stay with them for a while, until they built new houses. Ron was glad that the snow was just starting to melt, otherwise they'd have to wait to build. Ron said he'd take care of things on his end, and they said goodbye. Ron called Bill, and purchased several 100 acre lots near Jake's house, then he got lumberjacks busy clearing the pad for the house and pulling the stumps. By the time they got there, he should have 2 building sites ready for them. Josh talked to Sheila and Karen, and decided to leave all 4 of their Hummers and trailers there, and give 1 to Eric, since they blew up his truck. Karen quipped “Nice trade! Any time you want to blow up one of my trucks, feel free!”

Josh had to laugh when he realized that Eric would be trading a \$5,000 truck for a truck and trailer worth almost \$500,000. But he did help save their lives, and it was only money. He told Eric what he was going to do, and Eric said he was staying with Jack and Nellie for the duration. Jack needed help on the station, and with the brigands running loose, there wasn't going to be any business at the trailer park anyways. Eric was really grateful for the Hummer, then Josh remembered that he had to remove some stuff from it first. Eric told him he'd help him unload his personal stuff, since it was the least he could do. They unloaded the Hummer onto a hand cart, and Eric couldn't believe all the stuff he had stored in there. The 2 mini-Uzis, the rest of the SOPMOD kit, his medical kit and BOB all came out. Josh made sure he got all the gold and silver out of the Hummers as well. He took Sheila's kit out as well, but even with all their personal stuff removed, there was still a whole bunch of gear left that Eric could use. Over to 1 side, Josh had stacked his and Sheila's personal M -25's and M -200's, and all the ammo for them. He added Nick and Karen's M-25's to the stack, since they would probably want to shoot them in Alaska. He asked Karen what to do with the UZIs, since they wouldn't need them in Alaska, and Karen said to leave them for Sheila's parents and Eric to use. Josh moved 2 UZIs back to Eric's vehicle out of Karen's Hummer, and left Nick's Hummer alone except for removing the long rifles, the SOPMOD kit, and the gold. He told Eric to tell Jack that Nick's Hummer had 2 UZIs under the front seats, and gun ports in the doors. Eric knew that Josh was a serious survivalist when he went to the trouble of installing gun ports in the doors of an armored Hummer. Then he saw the paint damage, and realized that they must have run some serious gauntlets to get there.

Later that evening, Josh was talking with Nick.

“Josh, why did we have to bring all 4 vehicles? Wouldn't we have been better off doubling up and driving 2?”

“Nick, we got very lucky, and only got into 3 firefights. I was anticipating a much tougher trip, and the possible loss of at least 1 rig. That's why I had the vehicles combat loaded, so if we lost 1 or had to abandon it, we wouldn't have lost our only whatever. Remember when I walked out on that bridge? What if we were crossing it under fire, and my Hummer got stuck and badly

wrecked. I would have had to abandon it since we wouldn't have had time to tow it out. Also what if we would have done that creek crossing under fire, and I didn't have time to set up the winch, and one of the vehicles started floating away or sinking? We would have been forced to abandon the vehicle. If we would have only taken 2 vehicles, when we lost the 2nd vehicle, we would have been walking with what we could carry on our backs in the middle of the Outback, and hundreds of miles from the nearest town."

"Yikes, I never thought of that!"

"Unless you're trained to think that way, or someone teaches you, most people walk around in a daze until TSHTF, then they run around like decapitated chickens, since they don't know what to do. The trick is to think "what if" in advance, and then plan accordingly. Most of the people who died in the Tsunami died because they didn't know what to do, and panicked. I'd already planned our bug-out in advance, including what if we would have lost 1 or more vehicles on the way. Even still with all my planning, I screwed up royally by leaving all my eggs in 1 basket when we set up a fuel depot in Brisbane, and no where else. I never thought one incident would take them both out, then the Tsunami hit and flooded them both. If those 2 stations didn't have diesel, we wouldn't have made it."

"Glad we survived, I'll be even more glad when I regain the use of my shoulder. Whatever Ralph gave me, those pills are working great!"

"Just don't try to use your left arm for at least a month, or until Ralph tells you it's OK. That bullet did a lot of damage to muscle and tissue, but thankfully missed any arteries or bones. You got shot in the 1 spot in the shoulder where the bullet could go through and through. If it would have hit your collarbone, or your shoulder joint, you would have needed surgery."

"Well, I'm right handed and retired, so I can take it easy for a while."

"Just concentrate on raising your kids, if you get bored later, I'll find something for you to do part time for Allakaket Airlines."

The next morning, Josh had Sheila fly him to the RAAF base in her Turbo Commander. Josh asked General Ratliff if they had a helicopter they could borrow, he needed to check on their houses, and fly some buyers out to see it. He said that he had his personal Huey available, and they could use it as long as it wasn't needed for relief flights. Since his Huey wasn't equipped for Search and Rescue, and couldn't carry much cargo, it was sitting on the tarmac. They walked up to the chopper, and the pilot happened to be a friend of Nick's, so he agreed to fly them to their house. Josh waved Sheila and the 2 General Partners to the helicopter, then they flew to his house and landed in the roadway out front. They checked on both houses, and they were in excellent condition. Josh called Ray on the radio, and Ray told him that right after he left, a National Guard unit established a checkpoint on the road to their valley and kept the riff-raff out. Josh hadn't planned on that, but at the same time he realized he was right to bug out,

since he didn't know they would do that in advance, so he had to assume that they would have been invaded by survivors and brigands. He told Josh that the Lieutenant in charge of the team had the dead looter cut down, and his only comment was "Nice shot".

When the men saw the houses, they were impressed. Josh said all the food and furnishings were staying, and all they were taking was their clothes and other personal stuff, since everything had to fit inside the SuperGoose. Josh knew how much room they had last time, and decided to quickly box up their personal stuff. He asked the buyers if they wanted the ham radios, and they said that neither of them knew how to use them, so Josh disconnected the radios and took them, leaving the cables and tower. He showed them the basement shelter, and they immediately grasped that the shelter was built to withstand darn near anything. They were puzzled by the empty gun safe, since no one was supposed to own most guns. Once they were through, they called the receptionist, and authorized 2 wire transfers in the amount of \$1.5 Million USD each to Josh and Nick's accounts. While Josh was giving them the grand tour, Sheila was busy packing up their stuff, and a list of stuff Karen gave them for their house. They too were leaving almost everything behind except personal effects. Neither Nick nor Josh had much of a book or CD collection, so all they had were their clothes and memorabilia. Josh helped Sheila load the Huey, then Josh called the bank, and verified the transfers, and signed some forms transferring title, and handed them the keys. They asked for a lift back to the RAAF base, so Josh obliged.

Josh was glad that the SuperGoose already had a large fuel bladder installed, then realized the new bladder was bigger than the old one, and asked the Chief Mechanic about it. "We had some old 600 gallon bladders hanging around, so I swapped your 500 gallon bladder for a 600 gallon bladder so you could safely reach Hawaii. Josh was glad that nothing they were carrying was that heavy. Thinking quickly, he called General Ratliff, and asked him if he could make a shuttle trip with a cargo plane to Sheila's parents station so they could ship their stuff back to Alaska instead of overloading the SG. He asked Josh how much they wanted to ship, and suddenly Josh wished they had taken more time to take more stuff from the house, then he remembered it was all easily replaced, they had got the important stuff, and the 4 of them were OK. Josh said he could easily get it all in the SuperGoose, but they'd have to take out the fuel bladder and re-install it. The general said that would be easy, and they'd have some airmen handy to unload it when he got back, and store it in the shipping container. It would take a couple of weeks for the Royal Navy to clean up the harbor enough to get shipping back into the harbor, but since most of their stuff came by boat, harbor repair was a priority, and he was pretty sure he could get it on an outbound container ship, but it might take a while to get back to him.

Josh had a real problem. The \$5 Million in gold and silver weighed almost 600 pounds, and the 600 gallons of fuel weighed almost 4,000 pounds. They had 4600 pounds of payload without any of their personal effects. He decided to ship the ammo, since they had plenty of ammo in Allakaket and keep the M-25's and M-200's with them on the SuperGoose. They'd be heavy, but not dangerously so. Since the leg from Hawaii to Anchorage was a little over 2800 nautical miles, he only needed another 150 gallons of fuel to make it there with a good safety margin, so he'd only need to fill the bladder less than half-way, saving over 2400 pounds of payload weight.

He had the mechanic remove the fuel bladder and the seats, then flew to the station, loaded everything they were going to ship, then once they unloaded the plane at the base, he flew it back to the Station with the bladder installed.

They packed most of Karen and Nick's personal effects into the Gulfstream, then loaded the SuperGoose with Josh and Sheila's stuff, the rifles, and the Gold. Sheila said goodbye to her parents while Ralph, Samantha, Nick, Karen, and the 4 dogs boarded the Gulfstream for the long flight back home to Alaska. Josh spent a couple of minutes with Jack and Eric, assuring them that he'd take good care of Jack's little girl, and if they ever got into a pinch, and wanted to relocate to Alaska, to give him a call, or if they just wanted to visit. Josh and Sheila bid their goodbyes and the plane was loaded with their personal effects, clothes, and rifles. Next, he taxied to the fuel tanks, and squeezed every drop of JP-5 he could into the tanks and bladder, then taxied to the runway, waved goodbye to Jack, Nellie and Eric and took off. Josh was in no hurry to climb since there were no obstructions nearby, and he was way heavy. He slowly turned toward Hawaii and set the autopilot. They spent the next 14 hours flying to Hawaii, catnapping in their seats between conversations, books and CD's they'd brought to fight the boredom of a long overwater flight. Sheila was glad Josh had decided to ship the VIP seats, which left just enough room in the passenger cabin for the porta-potty and a tarp for privacy. Between the bladder, boxes, and rifle cases, the SuperGoose was stuffed to the ceiling. Josh didn't want to know how heavy they were, he was just glad that by the time they reached Hawaii they would be landing light, having burned off over 600 gallons of JP-5.

Josh's alarm went off 14 hours later, and they were right on schedule. He called in to the National Air Traffic center, and got a route into Honolulu. They landed, taxied up to the fuel depot, topped off the tanks, added 200 gallons to the bladder just to be on the safe side, then parked it in a secured lot they used on their last trip. Since they left everything in the plane except their carry-on bags, they went through the "Nothing to declare" line in Customs, and were soon through. They stayed at the same hotel as last time, and fell right to sleep after a quick hot shower. They weren't hungry, because this time Sheila remembered what happened last time, and had packed enough snacks and drinking water for the entire flight. The next morning, they took another shower, used the bathroom, and checked the plane out thoroughly. Once they were satisfied that everything was in the green, they boarded, pre-flighted the plane, and flew to Allakaket, since they didn't need to stop in Anchorage since they already went through Customs in Hawaii (not really, but it worked for them, they DID go through customs, but no one inspected the plane!) They endured the long overwater flight, and 11 hours later, landed at Allakaket. Ron met them with his pickup, and drove the weary travelers to his house, and had some baggage handlers unload the aircraft after Josh removed their clothes and the strongbox full of gold. He slid it out the side door, where a forklift operator loaded it into the back of Ron's pickup, where it sat until they unloaded it the next day. Josh and Sheila slept for almost 18 hours, and woke hungry as bears. Nancy had anticipated this, and had a huge pot of stew simmering on the stove, and a large loaf of fresh sourdough bread sitting on the counter.

Chapter 89 - Taps

2 weeks after Josh came home, Anne called Ron sobbing and said that Gene died in his sleep. Ron tried to console his mom, when all of a sudden she dropped the phone. Ron disconnected the call after yelling “Mom...Mom” and realized she couldn’t answer. He yelled for Josh to grab his Paramedic bag and get in the truck ASAP. On the way over, he explained what he thought happened. Thinking quickly, Josh called Ralph at the ER, and alerted him they were coming in with Anne as soon as they got her in the truck. When they reached Anne’s house, the door was locked, so Josh kicked it in, knocking the door off it’s hinges. When they reached Anne, she was unconscious but breathing. Josh did a quick evaluation, took her vitals, and she had a good pulse, and her respiration was OK, when he looked into her eyes, the pupils didn’t look right, and he thought she might have had a stroke. She was wearing her nightgown and housecoat, so as gently and carefully as possible, they carried her to the open crew cab door of the truck, and secured her as best as possible. Josh and Ron jumped into the front seat of the still-running truck and drove to the ER, where Ralph assessed her more thoroughly and agreed with Josh’s initial assessment of a major stroke. He told them he’d keep her under observation and had her on anti-coagulants to keep her from throwing another clot.

All of a sudden, Ron remembered that Gene’s body was cooling in Anne’s house. He told Ralph about Gene, and Ralph gave them a body bag, and asked them to bring Gene back to the ER so he could write the death certificate. It was freezing in the house, and Gene’s body was cold and stiff, which made their job easier. They handled Gene’s body with as much respect as possible, and got him into the bag, and once they were at the hospital, transferred him to a wheeled gurney. Once he was finished with Anne, Ralph filled out Gene’s Death Certificate, then called Bill, who acted as the County Clerk as well, and told him. Bill told Ralph to hold 1 minute, and came back on saying that Gene had left instructions to leave the body intact unless an autopsy was legally required, and to notify the Pentagon for burial at Arlington. With that out of the way, Ralph realized they didn’t have any cold storage, but he had a uninsulated storage building that should be cold enough. Josh said he’d be back in a minute, and took the American Flag flying out front down and draped the body bag with it. They wheeled the gurney out to the garage, and Josh offered Gene’s body one last salute, then he turned and left.

When they got back to the house, they all sat down and talked. Josh told them it was premature to make any long term plans for Anne. Her short-term needs would include round-the clock nursing or at least supervision, and rehabilitation depending on how much motor control she lost. Ron said he’d feel better with Anne living with them, and Josh volunteered to clean out his Grandma’s house, move Anne’s stuff and Gene’s memorabilia to Ron’s house, and stay at Anne’s until their house was made. Nick spoke up, and said, “If anyone should move to Anne’s house, it should be Karen and I, since Anne’s your grandmother, and Ron and Nancy are your Mom and Dad.” Josh agreed, but for different reasons. Anne might be lucid enough to be disturbed by the “strangers” living in her house.

The 4 of them quickly cleaned out Anne's house, actually the 3 cleaned, and Nick supervised when he wasn't crashing in a chair. Ron called them and told them that they were planning a Memorial for Gene the next day, so they should plan on being at the church at noon. Gene's body was now in a sealed casket since he wasn't embalmed, and right after the memorial, he would be flown to Washington for a full Military Funeral. Josh, Bear, Steve and Ron would be attending the body, with the Ex-Military personnel in dress uniform. Bear and Steve were looking pretty old and haggard, yet dignified in their military uniforms, Ron sat there in his best suit, and Josh was wearing his Dress Whites for the first time in years. They spent the long flight reminiscing about Gene.

When they landed, they were met by a Military Honor Guard which took possession of the body. They drove in procession to Arlington National Cemetery where the burial would occur. Once they reached the outer gate, the flag-draped casket was transferred from the hearse to a wheeled horse-drawn caisson. As it reached the grave site, they heard the familiar "Ruffles and Flourishes" with 3 flourishes by the bugles, denoting Gene's 3-star rank. When the NCOIC of the Honor guard commanded "Present Arms" all those in uniform saluted the casket, and the rifle team snapped smartly to "present arms". Once the Casket Team had secured the casket, the Military Chaplain and OIC give the "final salute" then lead the procession to the grave. The casket team set the casket down over the grave, and the OIC straightened and smoothed the flag. Once the Military Chaplain finished the service, everyone jumped at the sound of a volley of rifle fire, which was performed only for flag-rank officers and above. Once the Chaplain finished the Benediction, he stepped back from the Casket, and the OIC presented arms, indicating the start of the 21-gun salute. Once the echoes of the 3rd volley ended, the haunting strains of "Taps" echoed over the rolling hills. By a strange coincidence, another bugler on the far side of Arlington Cemetery echoed the first player's Taps, resulting in the strange but beautiful sound of "Echo Taps". With the conclusion of Taps, the OIC started folding the flag with practiced military precision. When he was finished, he handed the flag to the Military Chaplain, and since there was no Next of Kin present, Ron accepted the flag for his mom. As they left the lonely grave site, Josh saw a lone Marine standing at Present Arms, guarding the casket until it was buried. He wanted to snap a salute at the Marine, but knew he was under orders, so he refrained. He caught up with Bear and Steve, and the 3 military men just stood there and drank in the sight of all the fallen heroes. On the way out, they passed the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and asked the limousine driver to stop, so they could render honors. They got out and walked to the rope cordoning off public access to the tomb, and read the inscription. "Here Rests In Honored Glory An American Soldier, Known But To God." After several minutes, Master Chief "Bear" Simmons, USN SEALs (ret.) performed one last honor to his fallen CO, and those buried in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

"Attention!"

At his command 3 Old Soldiers snapped to attention, and 1 hand went to heart.

Being the Senior Officer present, Col. Steve Fellows, US Army (ret.) commanded "As You

Were.” since there was no officer present to return their salute. A Marine in Dress Blues coughed discretely behind them, and offered his condolences.

“Gentlemen, General Gene Shepard’s body will be interred before dusk, as is tradition. You’d be surprised how many military men stop here after a Military Funeral to pay their respects.” Before he turned to leave, he shook everyone’s hand, then they walked back to the limousine as a light rain began to fall.

They drove back to Dulles, and flew home on the same VC-120 they flew to Arlington. The mood was even more somber and subdued because they were drained by the experience. When Ron got home, Ralph was waiting for him. “I tried to reach you, but you had your cell phone off. Your Mom’s taken a turn for the worse. She’s paralyzed and on a respirator.”

“Ok, what’s her chances for recovery?”

“Barring a Medical Miracle, zero.”

“Ok Ralph, no heroic measures from here on out, keep her comfortable.”

“Ron, she’s going to have to stay in the hospital. You really should come with me, she might not make it much longer.”

They drove back to the Hospital. Anne was a shadow of her former self. Ron remembered his mom as a vivacious woman, full of life, now he looked at her, and knew her death wasn’t far off. He walked up and held her hand. The familiar touch must have woke her up, because she turned toward Ron, and Ron said “Rest Easy Mom, The Kids are Alright!”

Right then, she smiled, and suddenly alarms were going off as Ralph rushed in.

“What’s wrong?”

“Her heart’s stopped. She probably threw a clot, and stopped her heart. She’s already unconscious, and she’ll be dead in 6 minutes, and they’re nothing I can do, she’s already receiving a large dose of clot-busters.”

Ron leaned forward with tears in his eyes, kissed her forehead and said “Bye Mom.”

Ralph checked her vitals, and wrote the time of death on her chart.

The next day, Ron and Nancy’s kids, their families, Steve, and Bear - along with his family, met at the site of Ron’s lodge near HelpMeJack Lake for a private funeral and interment next to Roy, Oliver, and his pups just like she had requested. Every one of Ron’s sons pitched in to dig a deep grave for their Grandmother. Ron, Steve and Bear each moved a shovelful, but left the

heavy work to the men with the strong backs. After a brief funeral service, including Anne's favorite Bible passages, she was buried next to her Husband and Dog near the cabin she always called home. Once everyone had left, Ron spent some final time with his Mom, and knelt next to her grave. He brushed some dirt off her tombstone and whispered "Rest Easy Mom, The Kids are Alright!"

End of Book 3
To Be Continued in
Book IV
"The Kids Are Alright"